

THE REFORMATION AND THE IDEA OF THE NORTH

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Abstract

Both scholarly and popular perceptions have identified a profound cultural and political realignment of Europe with the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: a largely Protestant North confronting a predominantly Catholic South. This replaced a medieval conceptual geography of East-West, in which the North (on the basis of scriptural passages) was a zone of sinfulness and danger. This chapter argues that the emergence of a North-South cultural-religious dichotomy was more fraught and uncertain than often supposed. Late medieval North European humanists countered negative perceptions with patriotic accounts of national origins. In the era of the Counter-Reformation, British and Scandinavian Catholic exiles emphasised the intrinsic virtue and orthodoxy of northerners, and the potential for reclaiming their homelands from heresy. Protestants were often ambivalent about the North, not least since northern parts of England, Scotland, Ireland and Denmark-Norway were often associated with Catholic resistance, as well as with magic and superstition. The propaganda of the British Civil Wars reinforced both positive and negative stereotypes. While a cultural association of Protestantism with the North eventually took root, this was a contingent process, and should be seen more as a consequence than a cause of the stabilization of Europe's confessional borders.

Keywords

North, Reformation, Counter-Reformation, Humanism, Witchcraft

Introduction

Scholars have long inclined to the view that the European Reformation was a quintessentially 'northern' phenomenon, and that it contributed not only to the drawing of new political and cultural boundaries, but to an imaginative reconfiguring of Europe as a whole. 'Europe' in the form of medieval Christendom was anchored on the West, and defined in fundamental ways by its relationship to an eastern, non-European other. 'The shift to a north-south conceptual division of the continent', claims the Oxford historian Robert Evans, is 'datable to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', and it is strongly associated with the Reformation split between Catholic and Protestant (Evans 2006, 295-6)

The centrality of the Reformation to a north-south political division of Europe, and to an accompanying set of social and cultural characteristics, remains something of a scholarly article of faith. In his book *The Idea of North*, a wide-ranging and stimulating cultural history published in 2005, the British literary historian Peter Davidson writes that 'in Europe the map of relations between north and south was catastrophically redrawn at the Reformation: a new set of divisions appeared and, from the sixteenth century, travel between north and south was gravely restricted' (Davidson 2005, 43).

The Reformation plays an even more central role in another recent work of cultural history: *The Dream of the North*, by the Norwegian scholar Peter Fjågesund. Its long-term consequences, he suggests, include not just a severing of old ties and a growing northern cultural hostility towards the south, but a new celebration of the vernacular in the Protestant countries of the north, and with it, a greater openness on the part of traditional elites to folk and popular culture. Despite the emergence of intense nationalisms, northern Europe developed, in Fjågesund's view, a 'common cultural identity', one which was ultimately rooted in a spirit of 'free, critical debate that saw beyond the confines of a dogmatic and monolithic Catholic Church' (Fjågesund 2014, 25, 93-4).

Most recently, in a short book of 2016, the American literary critic Ricardo Quinones addresses what he calls 'the most decisive and far-reaching event of the second half of the second millennium': 'the division of European society and culture along a North/South axis'. The Reformation is vital to Quinones's story, generating the key critical concepts around which the narrative is organised: Christian liberty, scepticism, tolerance (Quinones 2016, vi, 139-40 and *passim*).

The aim of this chapter is certainly not to dispute that differences between north and south in Europe are meaningful and have deep historical roots. Nor do I want to claim that the Reformation was somehow unimportant or marginal to this process of divergence and distinction. But I do think that the web of relations between ideas about the north and the religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries deserves rather closer scrutiny than it sometimes receives. To regard the Reformation as a kind of straightforward contest between south and north, resulting inevitably in the triumph or ascendancy of the latter, is to paint the complex landscape of the past in the crudest of shapes and colours. In what follows, I want to suggest that, for Protestants and Catholics alike, the concept of 'The North' functioned as a rich and varied storehouse of ideas and motifs, a means of navigating through and around various cultural and political challenges. At the same time, it could be a real source of difficulty or anxiety. The discussion draws mainly on evidence from the British Isles, though it will also make reference to developments in Germany and Scandinavia.

What, however, do we mean when we talk about 'the North'? As cultural historians have long recognised, the North cannot just be a geographical area, of variable or debated extent. The North has always been, in significant ways, a place of the imagination.¹ It is also a direction, sometimes a direction of travel, and it is a fundamentally relational term – north, or the North, is defined by both connectedness with, and distinctiveness from, what is not north, or less north. North is situational, a matter of perspective, even of potentially infinite regression. In his poem of 1734, *An Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope wrote: 'Ask where's the north? at York, 'tis on the Tweed; / In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there, / At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where. / No creature owns it in the first degree, / But thinks his neighbour farther gone than he' (Pope 1881, 44). The shifting

¹ Important discussions of the North, especially the far North, in the early modern imaginary include Hagen 2015, 28-53; idem 2011; idem 2009, 138-168; Stadius 2001; Donecker 2010.

and intangible character of northernness, in uneasy conjunction with essentializing claims about it, represents the key to its potency, and its sometimes perilous ambiguity.

The Conceptual Geography of the Middle Ages

There is no doubt that for Christians in the middle ages, the conceptual geography of faith looked primarily to the east: Jerusalem was placed at the centre of maps, and churches were (literally) *oriented* to face towards it. It was to Jerusalem that Christ would return at his Second Coming, to announce the end of the world and the resurrection of the dead. For that reason, Christians were buried on their backs with their feet towards the East, ready to rise and greet their saviour. The place of the North in this schema was not only subordinate, but in many ways negative. This was largely on account of a number of scriptural passages that pointed to the North as an abode of danger and evil. The Prophet Jeremiah (1:13-14) spoke of seeing a pot boiling, facing towards the North, and then of the Lord saying to him, 'Out of the North evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land', as the tribes of the kingdoms of the North prepared their assault on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. The Book of Ezekiel, too, offered visions of Nebuchadnezzar's hosts descending from the North to wreak destruction (26: 7-12), as well as of the mysterious northern warlord Gog, bringing with him 'pestilence and bloodshed' (26: 38-9). Isaiah (14:12-13) seemed to identify the North as the chosen seat of Satan: 'I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north'. It was the considered opinion of St Augustine that north in scripture never signifies anything good (Jeffrey 1992, 554).

These associations received ritual and liturgical expression. Very often, only the south sides of parish churchyards were used for burial, the north being reserved for the interment of excommunicates, suicides or unbaptised infants. Carved figures representing Synagogue – that is, the failure of Jews to recognise the truth of Christianity – were often placed on the north side of churches. In an elaborate scheme of stained glass, surviving in the English parish church of Fairford in Gloucestershire, the Old Testament scenes are assigned to the windows of the north aisle; the corresponding New Testament images to the south aisle. The North represents, at best, prefiguration of the faith; the South symbolises its fulfilment. At the mass itself, it was common for the deacon to recite the gospel at mass facing north, in recognition of Jeremiah's prophecy about the source of evil, and also, so it was supposed, to symbolise the proclamation of the faith to the pagans of northern Europe. It has even been suggested that the fact that medieval churches, both in England and elsewhere in Europe, were consistently built on the north side of villages might symbolise a protective function for the community against evil spirits and devils expected to emerge from that direction (Mâle 1913/1958; Storms 1957, 16-17; Murphy 1983, 65-76).

There are some scattered hints of how the conceptual north of medieval Christianity mapped on to a 'real north' of human settlement and identity. The fourteenth-century English poet William Langland, in his visionary work *Piers the Ploughman*, includes an account of the fall of the rebel angels, and of Satan taking up residence in the North. Piers wonders 'why would that wicked Lucifer / Rather leap aloft to the north side / Than sit on the sun's where the daylight breaks?' In answer, the figure of Holy Church will only

say coyly, ‘were it not for northern men, I’d soon tell you’ (Langland 1996, 13). Contemporaries evidently saw connections between the sacred topography of scripture and their own social environments, though the delicacy here is most likely deliberately and comically ironic, given a pervasive familiarity with the scriptural texts, as well as a widespread cultural prejudice in much of midland and southern England against a supposedly wild, windy and uncivilised north of the country. When the Summoner in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* meets on the road a demon, disguised as a yeoman, and asks him where he resides, he receives the reply, ‘Brother... fer in the north contree’ (Chaucer 2008, 124). People from the far north of England, the counties of Westmorland, Durham or Northumberland, were barely intelligible to southerners, and Northerners travelling in the south sometimes carried with them special written certificates to prove they were not Scotsmen, against whom prejudices were still greater (Marshall 2015, 188).

The late medieval Scots entertained their own prejudices. The renowned theologian John Mair, Principal of the University of Glasgow, published at Paris in 1521 a Latin history of greater Britain, *tam Angliae quam Scotiae*. In it, Mair made a sharp distinction between *Scoti domestici*, house-holding Scots of the Lowlands, and the *Scoti sylvestres*, wild Scots of the Highlands. The later, on account of the fact that ‘they dwell more toward the north’, in forests and mountains, lacked reason, good morals and the capacity for civil self-government. They were, Mair observed, ‘much more prompt to fight’. They hated the lowlanders, ‘on account of their differing speech, as much as they do the English’ (Williamson 1996, 57-60). Such attitudes were deeply rooted in a fragmented county long divided between highland and lowland regions, but it is possible that they were sharpening even as governance of the country was becoming at least somewhat more secure and centralized.

Anthony Pagden and Arthur Williamson have drawn attention to a passage in Mair’s commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, published in 1519, just as the Spanish conquest of the New World was gathering pace. Mair cited the authority of Aristotle for the view that some men were made by nature to be enslaved, and their conquest was therefore just. Such were the inhabitants of the Antilles, those who ‘live like beasts on either side of the equator’. Interestingly, Mair immediately linked these with the ‘wild men’, referred to in the *Tetrabiblos* of Ptolemy, who live ‘beneath the poles’. The northerners of the classical imagination, and the indigenous peoples of the New World, were at once conflated and shorn of their humanity (Pagden 1986, 38-9; Williamson 1996, 57-9).

Of course, the Scandinavian kingdoms had their own *sylvestres*, wild inhabitants of the North, testing the patience and stretching the capacities of orthodox churchmen. In 1500, the dean of Nidaros, Sakse Gunnarson, petitioned the pope for restitution to the canonry of Trondenes, on the grounds that it lay on the far northern edge of the Christian world, near to schismatic Russians and to heathen Sami practising magical arts. The parish thus needed a reliable educated priest like himself, to uphold the true faith in these challenging conditions (Høgetveit Berg 2014, 66). Persuading Italian popes of the undesirability of far northern postings cannot have been too hard, and was probably an effective strategy for securing patronage. In 1541, James V of Scotland wrote to Paul III to request the appointment of Robert Reid as bishop of Orkney, a place sadly neglected by previous

bishops so that ‘little has been done for the improvement of manners or for religious development.’ In fact, by Scottish standards, the diocese of Orkney was neither particularly small nor especially poor. Nonetheless, James chose to describe it to the pope as comprising merely some ‘scattered isles in the polar ocean’ (Hannay and Hay 1954, 423; Donaldson 1987, 24).

Humanist Patriotism

Denigration and marginalisation represents, however, only one strand in medieval thinking about the North and its peoples. From classical times onwards, notions of characteristically northern valour and virtue contended with the images of barbarity and desolation (Rix 2015).² According to the thirteenth-century theologian Albertus Magus, the ‘north wind strengthens virtues, whereas the south wind weakens them’ (Davidson 2005, 26). In the course of the later middle ages, elites in northern Europe increasingly rediscovered and rewrote histories of their own lands, usually with pride rather than embarrassment or apology. One crucial milestone was the printing in 1470 of the *Germania* of the Roman historian Tacitus, with its portrayal of the ancient German tribes as honest and freedom-loving peoples: the work was taken up with enthusiasm by the leading humanist Konrad Celtis, who gave the first university lectures on the text in 1497. Positive perceptions of the ancient – and by extension, modern – Germans were strengthened with the publication in 1518 of Franciscus Irenicus’s *Germaniae exegesis* (Krebs 2012, ch. 3; Hirschi 2012, chs. 6-7).

The humanist scholarship of Renaissance Scotland also sought to vindicate the reputation of a nation which, from the perspective of Mediterranean Europe, was often viewed as geographically as well as culturally marginal. Hector Boece’s *Scottorum historiae* of 1531, in the influential and decidedly free translation of the jurist John Bellenden, roundly denounced authors ‘that sayis all peple far fra the sonne ar barbour[ous]’. Scotland’s climate was indeed bracing, but over centuries it had nonetheless consistently proved itself a realm of civility and culture (Williamson 1996, 46-7).

Equally significant was the development which Kurt Johanneson termed ‘the Renaissance of the Goths’. This may be seen as an attempt to reposition the peripheral kingdom of Sweden at the heart of European history, through valorising the character and achievements of the Gothic peoples who were supposed to have migrated outwards from there. The key figure in the story is Johannes Magnus, Archbishop of Sweden, and author of a history of the Gothic people and their kings, *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque Regibus* (1554), which drew on a number of other histories and chronicles of the Goths and northern rulers published in the first decades of the sixteenth century (Johanneson 1991, ch. 3).

Magnus’s work (written in the 1530s) made it into print through the efforts of his brother, and successor as Archbishop, Olaus Magnus, a tireless propagandist for the dignity of the Swedish realm and people. Olaus Magnus was responsible for the publication in 1539 of the *Carta Marina*, the first truly detailed map of the Scandinavian

² 1 for ‘the cultural conundrum that the north represented’ in the early Middle Ages.

world (Fig. 1). It is a work which combines impressive cartographic precision with an array of fables and wonders, and one which also manages to make the main Scandinavian power of the day – Denmark – seem decidedly small and marginal (Knauer 1981; Hagen 2015, 36-8).



Fig. 1: Carta Marina of Olaus Magnus (1539)

Olaus's most famous work is his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, history of the northern peoples, published at Rome in 1555. It is a remarkable text, brimming with ethnography and natural history, and one which seeks to open up the marvels and strangeness of the North, especially the far north of Finnmark, to a wide European audience. Magnus had much to say about magic and superstition among the Sami, especially in ages past. Yet interpretations which see the book as a conventional reinforcement of hostile medieval stereotypes about the North are wide of the mark (Williamson 1996, 47-7; Highley 2008, 76). In his preface, Magnus says that he undertook the work on behalf of those eager to learn 'what more might be expected beyond the well-worn saying of the prophet [Jeremiah], "Out of the north an evil shall break forth"'. His own preferred epigraph was a passage from the Book of Job, chapter 39: 'Out of the north cometh golden splendour'. The sentiment underlay his consistent emphasis on the material riches of the North, and the ingenuity of the people in extracting them, and in adapting to their environment. But at the outset, the meaning is more specific. The gold to be expected was 'a change in those cold sinners who, wearied with heresies on their difficult path... will at last be converted to a zeal for faith' (Magnus 1996-8, I, 8).

Counter-Reformation Norths

With Olaus Magnus, we have indeed passed over the Reformation and gone straight to the Counter-Reformation. At the time he published his history, Magnus had been a religious exile for over three decades. His life's mission was to recover Sweden for the Catholic Church, and a principal aim of the *Historia* was to persuade fellow prelates that

the effort was both feasible and worthwhile. Magnus was particularly annoyed by the claim of a German Lutheran historian of Scandinavia, Jacob Ziegler, that the Sami had failed to convert on account of fears about financial exactions from the papacy. By contrast, Magnus emphasised how ‘a large number of the people of the wild’ had already been drawn in to the community of believers ‘by devout homilies of Catholic priests’. One of the text’s many vivid woodcut illustrations shows a Sami couple travelling long distances to church on their skis, carrying in baskets on their backs the infants they wanted to be baptised (Fig. 2). The conversion of the Sami would only be complete, Magnus confidently predicted, ‘when heresies elsewhere are put down’ (Magnus 1996-8, I, 219).



Fig. 2: The piety of the Sami, from Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555)

Magnus attended the early sessions of the Council of Trent, and he energetically petitioned the pope and College of Cardinals for resources and legatine authority to spearhead a campaign to recover the Nordic countries for Catholicism (Johanneson 1991, 141-4). He was undoubtedly aware that part of the problem he faced was the way the scale and ferocity of the Lutheran revolt was reinforcing old stereotypes about the North as a place of menace and infidelity. At Trent in 1546, the Spanish Jesuit Alphonso Salmeron, theologian to Paul III, bemoaned the lack of faith among Germans, and reflected that ‘all evil comes from the north’ (Pichler 1871, 127).

It was an inescapable fact that heresy seemed to have taken root more readily in northern lands, and northern Catholics themselves sometimes reflected on it. The leading English Catholic exile Nicholas Sander, for example, in a work of 1566, portrayed Luther as a scourge of God for the people’s sins, ‘permitted like a proud King of Babylon to come out of the north, and to make spirituall bataile to the holy Citie of Hierusalem’ (Sander 1566, 14r). As the work of Christopher Highley has shown, in their polemical writings some English Catholic exiles drew upon a well-established ethnographical idea that the Turks were close kin to the Scythians, and that both were in their origins

quintessentially northern peoples. This allowed English Catholics to conflate the policies of their heretical oppressors with the notorious savagery of Turks and Scythians, and also to locate the persecution in a northern environment that bred hardness and cruelty. In notes accompanying the Douai-Rheims bible of 1609, the threatening figures of Gog and Magog, usually associated with the North and East respectively, are conflated as a single enemy: ‘the king and people of Scithyia, in the North part of the world, a barbarous savage, and cruel nation’ (Highley 2008, 78).

Nonetheless, the case can be pushed too far. English Catholics, like Swedish ones, were often instinctive patriots, and not usually, as we might say now-a-days, self-hating. The Jesuit priest Thomas Wright, for example, wrote from his London prison cell in 1600 that ‘those which inhabit these northern climates’ possessed ‘a natural inclination to virtue and honestie... a judgement disliking of evil’ (Wright 1601, A3r-v). Indeed, it would hardly have made sense for the proponents of a missionary endeavour to have started from the premise that the people they sought to reclaim for the faith were naturally inclined to depravity and heresy. The leader of the English mission, William Allen, sought to assure Pope Gregory XIII that heresy was really incompatible with the ‘inmost desires’ of the English, and that their eagerness to embrace ‘the ancient observance of the Catholic religion’ was something well known to those who have ‘investigated the humours of our own people, their minds, the inclinations of their souls’ (Renold 1967, 281). One of the most important literary outputs of exiled English Catholicism in the reign of Elizabeth I was Thomas Stapleton’s translation of the *Ecclesiastical History* of the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon monk, the Venerable Bede. The significance of Bede’s text is neatly summarised by the literary scholar Robert Rix: it traces how ‘the English, themselves warlike peoples from the North, had been transformed into a holy nation through the influence of the Roman Church’ (Rix 2015, 101).

The peoples of the North were not beyond redemption. An early seventeenth-century life of the Scottish Capuchin John Forbes began, like Olaus Magnus’s history of the previous century, by quoting the bracing judgement of Jeremiah, and by asking rhetorically ‘whether there can anie good come from the North’? Just like Magnus, the anonymous author had no doubt that ‘God hath not excluded the people of the North from the benefit of his holie vocation, but hath vouchsafed to call them to his heauenlie kingdome.’ It was not the occasion ‘to runne through all nations and regions of the North’, but it was beyond question that ‘the kingdome of Scotland, ancient and well knowne, hath brought forth some notable persons both men and women for pietie and holinesse of life’. Although, ‘by the seueritie of Gods iustice’, the kingdom was currently infested with heresies, yet the light ‘is it not soe wholly taken from them, but that it often breaketh out through the thicke clouds of errors, and sendeth forth beames’ (*The life of the Reuerend Fa. Angel* 1623, 2-3).

In the following generation, a remarkable, providential beam of light in the North was the abdication and conversion in 1654 of Christina, Queen of Sweden. On her arrival in Rome, she was at first housed in the Vatican in the Torre dei Venti (Tower of the Winds), constructed originally as an observatory. Bernini was tasked by the pope with refurbishment of the apartments, and he tactfully made sure that an inscription beneath the fresco depicting the north wind was whitewashed over: ‘ab aquilone pandetur omne

malum', from the North all evil will spread – a precis of Jeremiah 1:14, and a not so subtle dig at Protestant northern Europe (Mormando 2011, 222).

Another Swedish woman of aristocratic stock, born centuries earlier, still represented a light in the North for early modern Catholics; Olaus Magnus was an avid promoter of her memory (Johannesson 1991, 157-8). The visionary nun Birgitta had been made a saint in 1391, a mere eighteen years after her death. Boniface IX's bull of canonization suggested that God granted her revelations in order to show that 'something good might also come from the North'. The phrase was echoed in a text presented to the King of Spain by exiled English Bridgettine nuns in the early 1620s. Their founder was 'a strong woman from the furthest ends and capes', proof that God's grace could reach all parts of the world (Sahlin 2001, 194-5; Hamel 1991, 26-7).

The somewhat patronising tone of Pope Boniface's bull was commented on in 1610 by John Donne, poet, Protestant convert, and dean of St Paul's in London. In addition, Donne mocked the popish superstition that at mass, 'when the Gospell is song, all other parts being done towards the East, hee must turne to the North, from whence all euill is deriued, and where the Diuels dwell'. There was a long history, Donne suggested, of 'despite and contumelies' being offered to the peoples of the North by popes in Rome. Yet even so, it was beyond question that papal histories were 'full of the memorie of Benefites which [that] Sea hath receiued from Northern Princes'. Donne cited approvingly a stricture of the German Catholic historian Severin Binius, warning northern Catholics, 'to bee more circumspect in their obsequiousnesse to that Church'. There was, of course, a political purpose to all this. Donne hoped that English Catholics might be persuaded, in defiance of the wishes of the Holy See, to take the Oath of Allegiance to James I instituted in the aftermath of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot (Donne 1610, 107-8). Nonetheless, it is revealing that he seems to have regarded the soil of the North as fertile ground for papal weeds to take root, rather than as a natural environment for the flourishing of reformed faith. To date, cultural historians have not sufficiently recognised the extent to which, in the early modern period, the North remained a focus of hope for Catholics, and a source of ambivalence and anxiety for Protestants.

Superstition and Popery

There are norths within the North. It is undoubtedly significant that the political geography of all the northern Protestant powers was orientated towards the southern part of the kingdom in question – Edinburgh, London, Copenhagen, Stockholm. In each case, northern regions acquired associations with limited enthusiasm for reform, if not downright resistance.

In England, this manifested itself within a couple of years of Henry VIII's initial break with the papacy. The protest against the Reformation known as The Pilgrimage of Grace, breaking out in October 1536, was a massive popular rising, which for a few months wrested the entire northern third of the kingdom from the king's grasp. In all parts of the kingdom it was characterised not just as a rebellion in the North, but as a rebellion *of* the North. The Pilgrim leadership itself overtly appealed to specifically northern grievances, and a sense of collective northern identity, while government letters and proclamations consistently used such short-hand expressions as 'north parts', 'northernmen', 'commons

of the north'. Pickering's Song, a compilation of rhymes by Yorkshire minstrels, polished by a dissident Dominican friar, urged on the 'faithful people of the boreal region'. Blame for the ills of the realm at the feet of 'southern Turks', 'southern heretics, and 'the northern people in time long past / Hath little been regarded of the austral nation' (Bush 2009, 12-3, 168-72).

The perception on the part of English Protestants that parts of the North were hot-beds of Catholicism was to persist throughout the sixteenth century and beyond. It was reinforced in Elizabeth's reign with the outbreak of a rebellion in 1569 in North Yorkshire and County Durham. This 'Rising of the Northern Earls' was on a smaller scale than the rebellion of 1536, but was even more overtly pro-papal in its aims and ideology. Its repression was brutal, and left a legacy of bitterness on all sides (Kesselring 2007).

To varying degrees, the pattern replicates itself across the North Atlantic and Baltic World. In post-Reformation Scotland, Catholicism was associated with the Highland clans and with the retinues of the Earls of Huntley in the north-east of the country. In 1588, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland established a series of clerical commissions for visitation of regions where 'the Jesuites and Papists chieflie resort, and have overthroun the greater part... with the unhappy seed of popery'. The most extensive commission was directed to 'the north parts, from Dee to the Diocesse of Kathness' (*Acts and Proceedings 1840, 724*).



Fig. 3: John Derricke, *The image of Irelande with a discoverie of woodkarne* (1581)

In the other island kingdom of Ireland, popery was prevalent in all parts. Yet English observers located the heart of resistance in the northern province of Ulster, where Gaelic lordship and social structures were particularly entrenched. Perhaps the most famous English representation of traditional Gaelic society is the series of woodcuts published by John Derricke in 1581, depicting the barbarous habits of Irish warriors, or kern, and their slavish subjection to popish priests (Fig. 3). In his accompanying text, Derricke wanted readers to understand that it was not his intention to disparage the population of Ireland as a whole: it is not our Englishe Pale, whiche in any respecte I haue touched, nor yet those of the Southe, whom I haue impeched, nor yet of the Weste, whom I haue nipped,

but a people out of the Northe, whose vsages I beholde after the fashon there sette doune'. Such Ulstermen were 'pernicious vipers' (Derricke 1581, B2r).

In the Scandinavian kingdoms, the association was between Catholic obstinacy and the farther north was perhaps not quite so marked as in the British Isles and Ireland, though Lutheran reform was implemented relatively swiftly and thoroughly in Denmark, and much less smoothly in Norway, where Archbishop Olav Engelbrektsen's rebellion enjoyed considerable support in the North. It is equally the case that a reformation enacted in Denmark in 1536 was not effectively implemented in Iceland until 1550, when the stubborn political resistance led by Bishop Jón Arason of Hólar ended with the bishop's beheading (Høgetveit Berg 2014, 67; Cunningham 2011, 65-92). In Sweden, by contrast, the most serious outbreaks of popular resistance to the introduction of Lutheranism took place in the southern province of Småland (Kouri 1995, 54-5). Finland is often regarded as having accepted reform fairly passively. In an interesting recent article, however, Kaarlo Arffman argues that popular resistance, including in the North, may have been more significant and longer lasting than historians usually suppose (Arffman 2016, 255-73).

What was certainly common to both the Scandinavian kingdoms and the British ones was a widespread perception that northern regions were places particularly susceptible to the influence of the devil, environments conducive to the harbouring of superstition, and the practice of magic and witchcraft (Hagen 2015; Donceker 2010).³ The seventeenth-century Scottish jurist Thomas Craig had little doubt that Greenland, Iceland and Finland were places 'full of apparitions, ghosts, hobgoblins and fairies' (Williamson 1996, 48). In part, this may represent the enduring hold of the cultural prejudices of the middle ages and a persistent association of evil with the North. But the connection was most likely strengthened by the perception of lingering religious conservatism in cultural and political peripheries. The conflation of popish superstition with demonic activity was a cliché of Protestant intellectual culture. Ironically, the idea may have received further currency from the popularity in Protestant Europe of Magnus's *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, which went through half a dozen Latin editions before 1669, with translations into German, Dutch and English, as well as French and Italian. Magnus's vivid descriptions of magical practices among the Sami caught the imagination of learned Protestant readers. The seventeenth-century English polymaths Robert Burton and Sir Thomas Browne were both familiar with the text, making reference in their writing to magicians of Lapland and the selling of knotted winds to sailors. The Puritan poet John Milton appears to have owned a copy, and critics have detected its influence in some of the early books of *Paradise Lost*, a text in which Satan in various passages is repeatedly portrayed as massing his forces in the North. A reference to 'Lapland sorcerers' appears in Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* (Magnus 1996-8, lxx-lxxii; Hankins 1958, 205-10; Milton, *Paradise Lost*, V, 688-9, 725-6, 755-60; VI, 79-91; Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors*, IV, iii, 13).

Olaus's depictions of the Sami, a people within the political borders of the state, but separate from the norms and institutions of civil society, invited comparison with

³ See also Andersson Burnett, 2010, pp. 67-77; Barraclough, Cudmore & Donecker, 2016.

marginal populations elsewhere, particularly the highlanders and islanders of Scotland and the Gaelic-speaking clans of northern Ireland. James VI, in his 1596 treatise on witchcraft, *Daemonologie*, remarked ‘this kind of abuse is thought to be most common in such wilde parts of the world as Lap-land and Fin-land, or in our North Isles of Orkney and Schetland... because where the Diuell finds greatest ignorance and barbaritie, there assailes he grossliest’ (*The Workes of the Most High* 1616, 129). Whether such perceptions had a direct impact on actual patterns of witchcraft prosecution is less certain. Highland Scotland actually experienced many fewer trials than Lowland Scotland, and Ireland was almost completely untroubled by early modern judicial witch-hunting. Yet, as Liv Helene Willumsen’s meticulous comparative study has shown, per head of population, levels of prosecution and execution in the Northern Isles were slightly higher than for Scotland as a whole. In Finnmark they were dramatically higher than the Norwegian average. Here the most common categories of victims were Norwegian women and Sami men, suggestive perhaps of cultural anxieties specific to a multi-ethnic, frontier region. A point of interesting comparison between Northern Norway and Orkney is that in both regions the resident Protestant ministry was largely comprised of outsiders: Danes and southern Norwegians in the former case, mainland Scots in the latter. A potential for cultural misunderstanding between pastors and people was as a result most likely increased (Willumsen 2013, chs. 5-6, 9-10; Høgetveit Berg 2016; Rasmussen 2016, 21, 52).

Perhaps the most striking way in which Protestant writers taxonomised the indigenous peoples of the North was to conflate them with the pagan inhabitants of the New World, a strategy we have already seen at work with the Catholic theologian John Mair. Philip Sidney’s translation of a work by the Huguenot Philippe de Mornay observes that ‘euen yet still at this day, we know... but very little of the North. It is not past two hundred yeres ago, since the Swedians sent the first inhabitants into the country of Groneland: and both Scotland and Ireland (being in our part of the world) are yet still halfe barbarus.’ The text goes on to identify a classical point of reference in Caesar’s *Commentaries*, and his portrayals of a forested Germany full of ‘savage and beastly’ inhabitants. ‘He seemeth heere’, de Mornay comments, ‘to speake of the Cannibals, or the people of Brasilie’ (Mornay 1587, 118).

A similar analogy is implicit throughout Edmund Spenser’s 1596 treatise, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*. The work proposes a military colonial solution to the problem of governance in Ireland, with the savagery and incivility of the native Irish serving to justify English conquest. Spenser had read Olaus Magnus, citing him as an authority on the wild ‘Northern’ Scythians to whom he frequently compares the Irish. Numerous textual references to the Spanish, and to their memorialising of the conquest of the Indians, suggests Spenser’s interest in Ireland as an English riposte to the Spanish colonization of the New World.⁴

In the hands of other writers, the parallels became yet more explicit. Hugh Peters, radical Puritan preacher and army chaplain, wrote in 1646 that ‘the wild Irish and the Indian doe not much differ, and therefore would [ought to] be handled alike’. The

⁴ Spenser, 1633, 35-6 (on Magnus); 27-8, 31-2, 40, 43, 72, 96 (Spanish). See Miller, 1998, ch. 2.

early Baptist leader Roger Williams, who returned to England from America at the start of the 1640s, was in little doubt that ‘we have Indians at home – Indians in Cornwall, Indians in Wales, Indians in Ireland’ (*Mr. Peters last report* 1646, 5; Williamson 1996, 56).

British Orientations

The civil strife convulsing both Ireland and mainland Britain in the 1640s provided new opportunities to reflect on the North and northernness as categories of challenge and threat. During the English Civil War, Jeremiah’s warnings of blood-thirsty enemies to the North acquired a new and urgent topicality, particularly among parliamentarians viewing parts of northern England as nests of malignant royalists. In a sermon at Great Yarmouth in December 1642, the non-conformist minister John Brinsely drew parallels between the enemies of parliament and the ancient Babylonians, ‘which comming out of the North should overrunne, overflow, and drowne that whole Land with... a deluge of blood’. Jeremiah’s seething pot, according to an anonymous pamphleteer, prefigured ‘the desperate Cavaliers in the North, boyling with their lust and filthinesse’ (Brinsley 1643, 1-2; *Boanerges, or, The Parliament* 1643, 2).

With the defeat of Charles I, the trope of northern malevolence could be reinscribed onto new threats – in particular the mystical Quaker sect, whose origins and early successes lay in the north of England. This was, according to the Puritan pamphleteer William Prynne, ‘a shrewd argument of their badnesse’, for did not the scripture warn that ‘out of the north an evill shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land’? A staple of anti-Quaker propaganda was that they were really papists in another guise. Prynne reminded readers of the 1569 rising against Elizabeth, pointing out that the northern county of Westmorland ‘is well known to have abounded with Jesuites, Popish Priests, Fryers, Recusants, and persons Popishly affected, ever since the Reformation’ (Prynne 1655, 13-14, 36-7).

Other anti-Quaker pamphleteers simply rehearsed an old proverb, ‘All evil comes out of the North’. It was, remarked the non-conformist minister John Faldo, a saying ‘I suppose grounded on manifold experiences’ (Faldo 1673, 15; Brown 1678, 513; Gilbert 1657, 32). In 1656, the Yorkshire-born Quaker James Nayler’s blasphemous recreation (in Bristol) of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem prompted one member of parliament to declare ‘it verifies the proverb, *ab aquilone nil boni*’ (*Diary of Thomas Burton* 1828, i. 156).

The Latin adage, derived from the Vulgate rendering of Jeremiah 1:14 – ‘*Ab aquilone pandetur malum super omnes habitatores terræ*’ – circulated in sixteenth-century England in the form of the rhyming couplet ‘out of the north, all ill comes forth’ (Dent 1981, 183; Tilley 1950, N213). Seventeenth-century variants included ‘cold weather and knaves come out of the north’, and ‘three great evils come out of the north: a cold wind, a cunning knave, and a shrinking cloth’ (Codrington 1678, 19, 341). A version attributed to the legendary Yorkshire prophetess Mother Shipton was ‘Forth from the North shall mischief blow / And English Hob shall add thereto’. Writing under the restored monarchy of Charles II, Mother Shipton’s editor glossed the prophecy to allude not only to ‘that

Ancient proverb, 'From the cold North all ill comes forth', but also to 'our troubles commencing in 1639, taking their original rise from Scotland' (*The Life and Death of Mother Shipton* 1682, 40-1). Given the long history of antagonism between the northern and southern kingdoms of mainland Britain, it is unsurprising that the proverbial advice to be wary of the North sometimes received an anti-Scottish spin. Citing the proverb in a work of 1648, the moderate royalist James Howell observed that 'it was a Northern Nation that brought these cataracts of mischief upon us'. He protested that he did not mean to disparage the whole of Scotland, but insisted that 'they are people of differing Intellectualls, differing Lawes, Customes, and Manners unto us' (Howell 1648, 13). Little sign, as yet, of Peter Fjågesund's 'common cultural identity'. In a pamphlet of 1650, the republican journalist Marchamont Nedham warned defeated royalists not to look for help from Scotland, for 'its an old saying, Nullum bonum ex Aquilone' (Nedham 1650, 46). The Independent minister Peter Sterry, in a tract of 1652, gave thanks for national deliverance from 'the Scotch Tyranny, and Scotch Presbytery, which came like a Tempest from the North' (Sterry 1652, 14).

All of this represents only one side of the story. There are positive visions of the North, and northernness, in seventeenth-century English Protestant writings. Sterry himself nurtured millenarian visions of Christ returning to earth, and taking his faithful saints with him 'out of the North'. His geographical locating of the North was unashamedly anglo-centric: 'nowhere upon the face of the earth do there appear to be any number of heart spiritually acquainted, spiritually conversing with our Lord Iesus... save in this Poor, small spot of Ground' (Sterry 1652, 35-6).

Among more internationally-minded English Protestants, there was an eagerness, at the turn of the 1630s, to share in a general European excitement about the astonishing military victories of Gustavus Adolphus, The Lion of the North. Catholic enemies, meanwhile, sought to portray him as an embodiment of the barbarous northern evil alluded to by the Hebrew prophets (Stadius 2007, 49-68). In a well-known image from the Stadtbibliothek in Ulm, a trio of exotic troop types from Gustavus's polyglot army exemplify a specifically northern, barbaric threat to the settled German lands. A Laplander, a Livonian and a Highland Scot, clad in animal skins and adorned with woodland foliage, seem set on plunder and rapine. The Livonian is mounted on a reindeer, an animal perhaps understandably unfamiliar to the German engraver (Fig. 4).

The interest in a 'Northern Lion' predated Gustavus's entry into the Thirty Years War, and survived his death. The prophetic idea, grounded on various biblical texts, was reinvigorated in the sixteenth century by the unearthing in 1520 of the Tiburtine Sybil's supposed prediction about the appearance of a great northern light; by Paracelsus's prophecy of a mighty conqueror in the last, golden age; and by Tycho Brahe's discovery in 1572 of a new star, which the astronomer linked to ancient prophecies of a northern ruler performing wondrous deeds at the end of the world. In the 1650s, English astrologers variously linked the northern lion to the exiled son of the executed Charles I, and to a future, as yet unborn, king of Sweden (Donecker 1979, 168-9, 172-3).



Fig. 4: Northerners in the army of Gustavus Adolphus, Stadtbibliothek Ulm, Einblattdruck 231

The biblical passages associating the North with evil, in particular Jeremiah 1:14, were not an insurmountable challenge for Protestant exegetes. One line of interpretation was to suggest the verses were purely allegorical: Jeremiah's seething pot represented human pride; the North merely a handy symbol for the devil seeking to bring it to the boil (Mornay 1600, 246). Calvin's Jeremiah commentary was decidedly sober, stressing the regional context of a threat to Jerusalem, and the historical identity of peoples, Chaldeans and Assyrians, dwelling north of Judea. In this he was followed by the annotators of the English Geneva Bible of 1560.⁵

A more ambitious interpretation appeared in a dialogue by the Italian Protestant Celio Secundo Curione. This suggested that popish priests were far amiss in interpreting Jeremiah's prophecy to mean that 'nations of the North parts are cause of all euill & heresie.' Rather, Antichrist's fury was directed towards the North because it was here his true identity would be uncovered (Curione 1566, 84r-v). Some commentators moved past Jeremiah 1, with its vision of evil coming down from the North, and alighted on Jeremiah 50, verses 3-9, where God speaks of a great force massing against Babylon out of the North (Coale 1665, 45; Trapp 1660, 223-4, 358; Philly 1664, 88; Howgill 1676, unpaginated). Yet even the former passage could be turned to the purposes of Protestant military triumphalism. An account published in England in 1626 of the Dutch attack on the Portuguese capital of Salvador de Bahia in Brazil recounted gleefully how 'a Nation out of the North came vpon them, a people whose language they vnderstood not hastily assaulted them, so that though their pots were on boyling... yet had they no stomackes to eate' (I. B., *A plaine and true relation* 1626, 4).

In 1603, with the accession to the throne of James VI of Scotland, the question of whether anything good could come out of the North suddenly became highly pertinent

⁵ Calvin 1620, 31-2; *The Bible and Holy Scriptures conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament* (Geneva, 1561), marginal note to Jeremiah 1:14.

for English Protestants. Celebratory verses spoke of him as a blessing sent from the North. One set, composed at Pembroke College, Cambridge, concluded: '(Omne malum ex Aquilone) licet clamare Papistis, / (Omne bonum ex Aquilone) libet cantare Britannis' – All evil comes from the north, let the papists cry, / All good comes from the north, the British delight to reply (*John Nichols's The Progresses* 2014, IV, 275). A collection of poems, in Latin and English, published in London in 1604, made much of how 'The Northstarre now is... our Sotherne sonne'. Old proverbs might warn of evil from the North, but 'Let Boreas blastes to others evill bring, / All good to us that sends us such a king.' What is striking here, of course, is the sense of how unlikely to people this eventuality must seem. James is a providential exception to expectations of what the North might offer, almost a kind of Protestant St Birgitta. As the poet noted, 'It was no humane force brought this to pass' (*Northerne poems congratulating the Kings* 1604, 4, 14).

The idea of James as a providential, even prophetic figure continued to be underlined by royal propagandists, for example in a treatise of 1617 by the itinerant Scots scholar James Maxwell. The king was 'our Jacob from the North', his accession prefigured in the words of Isaiah 41: 'I haue raised vp [one] from the North'. Maxwell, however, was less inclined than English versifiers to see the idea of blessings from the North as intrinsically unlikely. He claimed to have written a treatise 'touching the seate of Sathan: whether it was to be in the North, as the Romish Doctors doe holde, or in the South, where I prooue against the Romane Doctors by Scripture and nature, by Theologie and Astrologie, by Philosophie and Historie, how that the North is absolutely the most diuine, eminent and excellent, the very seate of God, and not of Sathan, and the chiefe receptacle of his Church' (Maxwell 1617, A1v, B2r, 36, 74).

For some Protestant commentators, a vision of the North as the place of God, rather than of Satan, rested on the belief that the prophecy of Isaiah 41 actually referred to Christ. This was the view of the Puritan minister Joseph Caryl, whose 1655 commentary on the Book of Job included an attempt to decode the prophet's search for God 'on the left hand, where he doth work'. According to Caryl, the most natural positioning of a man's body meant that the left hand signified the North, and he proceeded to argue that God did work 'more in the Northern parts of the world then he doth in the South.' This made sense on a global scale – 'the Northern parts of the world are more inhabited and peopled then the Southern are' – but it also served as an interpretative key to the histories of Europe and the near east. The Roman was the mightiest, because the most northerly, of the ancient empires, but was in its turn overcome by hardier peoples from the North. It was from this experience, Caryl implausibly believed, that there arose the famous proverb, 'all evil comes from the North'. In more recent times, the Gospel had been preached more clearly in northern than in southern parts, and as for the nations of Britain, 'Have not we found God working in the North? What changes, what variety of action have our Northern parts both seene and felt? What wonders of mercy and salvation?' (Caryl 1655, 362-5).

Conclusion

Pride in a broad sense of northernness was surely a component of Protestant identity, in England and elsewhere. Despite his digs at the Scots, Marchamont Nedham offered

effusive praise of ‘the Northern and more manly People’, unacquainted with luxurious diets and apparel, or other ‘melting enchantments of more wanton Nations’. A propensity to act courageously, and an aversion to faction and corruption, helped explain why in former times the Dutch and the Swiss were able to win their political freedom, while Neapolitans, Milanese and Florentines lost theirs (Nedham 1650, 42). Fynes Moryson, an English gentleman who spent much of the last decade of the sixteenth century travelling around Europe and the Mediterranean, took the considered view that ‘northern men are soone drawn with the love of Religion, the outside whereof the southerne men can skilfully paint over.’ To Moryson, the father of the Reformation was simply ‘our Northern Luther’ (Highley 2008, 75). Here we can see the lineaments of what was to become a very familiar picture – an intrinsic connection, what Max Weber might have termed an elective affinity, between Protestantism and the North. Nonetheless, what I have attempted to argue in this chapter is that it took a long time for that connection to become as stable and obvious as it often appears to be today. In fact, we should probably look towards the Enlightenment, with its theories of environmental and climatic determinism, for the real implantation and flowering of the idea (Quinones 2016, 72-7). Early modern Protestants inherited a cultural and scriptural legacy of ambivalence towards the North and northernness that was often deepened by their own experience of living in geographically extensive and multi-ethnic societies. At the same time, northern Catholics frequently expressed pride in ethnic origins and in the Christian history of their own nation, while suggesting that it was ripe for reconversion to the true faith. As historians, we have long moved beyond the idea that the failure of the Reformation in Italy and Spain, like its triumph in England or Sweden, was somehow inevitable or irreversible. Ideas about the religious underpinnings of a quintessentially northern character were surely much more a consequence than a cause of the eventual stabilization of the confessional map of Europe.

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