Reapproaching the Pagan Celtic Past – Anti-Nativism, Asterisk Reality and the Late-Antiquity Paradigm

Jonathan M. Wooding

Until relatively recently, many Irish scholars operated with a comfortable, even complacent, assumption that a measure of understanding of pre-Christian belief systems could be recovered from texts written by Christians in the early middle ages.[1] This assumption has been overtaken, especially since the early 1990s, by what we might describe as a 'paradigm shift'. We all know the basic story. A simmering debate over Christian or pre-Christian origins for certain early Irish texts went on during the third and into the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, coming to a head in the 1980s. Before that, default assumptions of primal origins for distinctively Irish institutions or religious motifs had been mostly unchallenged. The 'anti-nativist' critique challenged these assumptions on the basis that Irish texts were exclusively of Christian authorship and hence their contents could only be safely assumed to be a past mediated—even created—in terms of a Christian vision. The critique thus was partly about the limits of studying the world 'outside the text', paralleling, though not explicitly sourced in, wider post-modern debates about textuality. A by-product was a tendency to implicate all recoverable elements of the Celtic past as representations sourced in Judeo-Christian culture. This presents issues for the study of Celtic religion in particular.

It is customary for historians of religion to open their papers by stating their position with respect to belief in a particular faith (and the ferocity of the anti-nativist debate might seem to rival some religious conflicts!). I have spent most of my career teaching interpretation of Christian texts in the context of church history. In this I have accepted the position that it is reasonable to assume that any evidence recovered from a text of monastic authorship is potentially 'Christian' in origin or through mediation (the 'anti-nativist' position). This has been a heuristic position, as I feel anti-nativism to be in philosophical terms scarcely a defensible position. The following is not an *apologia*, nor a personal road to Damascus (or perhaps Drunemeton), but a personal reflection on why the 'anti-nativist' school of thought emerged. The paradigm-shift which brought about 'anti-nativism' has had undoubted benefits for encouraging critical perspectives on the reading of Celtic

---

Jonathan M. Wooding, j.wooding@lamp.ac.uk
Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Wales Lampeter

texts. The question I want to ask now is whether this critique has exhausted its usefulness. I also want to consider here whether the polemic should be regarded as purely a literary problem, or whether it needs to be understood in terms of wider cultural politics.

I

The 1955 publication of James Carney's *Studies in Irish Literature and History* can be seen as the beginning point of a late-twentieth century 'anti-nativist' movement.[2] Not that the 'movement' Carney is seen to have inspired was characterised by any rapid gestation (McCone 1990, 2). Howard Meroney's review in *Journal of Celtic Studies* shows what a challenge the book presented to the orthodoxy of the time, but Carney's views were initially not very influential in the face of a consensus, led by Gerard Murphy, Myles Dillon, Daniel Binchy and Kenneth Jackson, that the earliest Irish sources spoke to a distant primal, Indo-European or Iron Age past. Only in the 1960s and '70s did Carney came to be singled out as a figure for sustained polemic by enthusiasts for the Dumézilian paradigm such as Alwyn Rees and Proinsias Mac Cana.[3]

A key matter to note is that *Early Irish Literature and History* fired on more than one front. Its broad position was a challenge to insularity as much as nativism: what was good about early Irish literature was neither its origins in purely local culture, nor its acquisition of external elements only at some very early phase in prehistory, but the engagement of Ireland with a Classical and Biblical tradition inherited from the Christian world, and also engagement with neighbouring medieval literatures. Key sources treated in the book included *tána bó* tales, *immrama* and poetry. These sources had already been the subject of anti- (or at least contra-) nativist approaches. Thurneysen had long before suggested the influence of Virgil on the *Táin* (Thurneysen 1921, 111). William Flint Thrall (in an article that unfortunately nobody much was ever able to obtain) had as early as 1923 sketched the case for regarding many of the otherworld voyage tales as being, at least in their present form, closely related to the *peregrinationes* of Irish monks in search of 'a desert in the ocean' (Thrall 1923, 276-83). Mary Byrne (in an article that was more easily obtained but unfortunately rather brief) in 1938 considered a more or less exclusively Christian origin for the supposedly 'native' custom of exile in a boat cast adrift (Byrne 1932, 97-102). These were somewhat isolated statements, however, and across the same period a scholar of theology could write

---

2   Ó Corráin, Breatnach & Breen, 1984, 382-438; also Breatnach 1984, 439-59.
3   Rees 1966, 31-61; and the sequence of studies by Proinsias Mac Cana in *Ériu* in the 1970s: Mac Cana 1972, 102-142; 1975, 33-52; 1976, 95-115, in repr. pp. 52-72.

an important book on Irish eschatology in which he struggled to find a native origin for otherworld motifs that were all too obviously Christian (Seymour 1930). These are selective examples, but I note them partly because of the general absence of these topics from the terms of the debate as pursued in the 1980s, in which the laws and *Bretha Nemed* were more central, which should not lead us to overlook their centrality to the formation of the 'anti-nativist' proposition.

There was no concerted position in early 'contra-nativist' interpretations. Thrall, for example, while seeking origins for the *immrama* in Christian monastic activity, was unconvinced by Zimmer's case for the influence of Virgil (Thrall 1917-1918, 449-474). The cases argued were not doctrinaire, but individual and circumstantial. And the 'nativist' position can hardly be said to have been consistent. The conclusions of the study of *Branwan uerch Llŷr* by Proinsias Mac Cana, later pigeonholed as an 'arch-nativist' (*cf.* Dumville 1996, 394), could only be described as anti-nativist (Mac Cana 1958, esp. 187-9).

In many ways Carney's views were brought to prominence through the support of younger colleagues for whom he was something of a mentor. The stalking horse for the anti-nativist assault in the 1980s, as is well-known, was the demonstration by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Aidan Breen, in the 1984 volume of *Peritia*, that passages in what Binchy had singled out as the most archaic stratum of Irish legal texts contained calques of Latin Canon Law. Alwyn Rees in 1963 had considered it beyond argument that 'the laws are admittedly old "their basic structure is pagan"' (Rees 1966, 39). Ó Corrain *et al.*'s revelation of Christian influence on the putatively pre-Christian stratum of the laws was thus an assault on the securest refuge of theorists of pagan origins. The 1989 *Festschrift* for James Carney, edited by Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Kim McCone became something of an anti-nativist celebration.

There was, however, never unanimity in the anti-nativist camp either on academic or personal grounds. Donnchadh Ó Corráin critised this in a brief 1994 salvo, in which he found 'insufficient rigour' in applying the central question of anti-nativism:

It is not enough to throw Indo-European out the front door if it comes in the back door in the form of tri-functionalism, wolf-men, fire cults and the like. Of course there are survivals, at different levels from the pre-Christian past (more from the Neolithic revolution than the Indo-European, I imagine). It is difficult to quantify them, but the problem needs to be addressed formally.[4]

Ó Corráin thus rejects anything but the most ephemeral of survivals from the pre-Christian past and has gone on to proffer a vision of some the more archaic Irish literature owing as much if not more to Hebrew tradition than native Irish. Not

---

4   Ó Corráin 1994, 25. For a reaction see Ó Cathasaigh 1995, 63.

everyone has followed him. Trifunctionalism, in particular, has continued unabated, albeit in the form that Tom Sjöblom has recently defined as the 'soft' form of the mythological approach (2004, 63-64). It remains a curiosity that enthusiasts for the typologies of Georges Dumézil turn up on both sides of the polemic, even though these would seem, at a glance, to be only consistent with the nativist paradigm.[5] One is left with the impression that, instead of Carney's rather sweeping belief in external connections, the anti-nativists divide on their choices as to which contacts of Ireland in the Celtic past they wish to selectively allow or exclude. We will return to this point below. Some other of the more obvious self-contradictions of the anti-nativist polemic have been documented by Patrick Sims-Williams and David Dumville in extensive reviews of McCone's 1991 monograph, and I have little to add to their analyses at this stage (Sims-Williams 1996, 179-196; Dumville 1996, 389-398). They tellingly note the degree to which the anti-nativist position created something of a 'straw man' out of the nativist sympathiser—I can only recommend a glance at Alwyn Rees' 1963 plenary lecture to the International Congress of Celtic Studies to blow away the straw: in it he disagrees with Binchy, Murphy and T.F. O'Rahilly, as well as Carney.

The genesis of the 'paradigm shift' was indeed far more complex than can be discerned from the publications of the 1980s and '90s. It may be said to arise organically out of the relationships of many of the protagonists, as well as the political and intellectual circumstances of, in particular, twentieth-century Ireland and Irish university life. It has an origin in cultural politics that affects its development as a purely reasoned position. When one revisits this debate it is striking now to see how much of its approach was couched in very limited philosophical terms. What was at issue was primarily a 'truth'/'fiction' dichotomy: we either can recover the past—or earlier strata of texts—through 'excavating' texts, or we cannot.[6] The value of such exercises had been questioned, not on grounds of truth, but of taste, by J.R.R. Tolkien in his famous lecture on *Beowulf* as long ago as 1936.[7] The truth dichotomy leads to rather pedestrian approaches to literary questions (a point made by McCone 1991, 6). The most laudable element of Carney's polemic had been, arguably, to restore agency to early Irish authors—*viz.* his comments on Selmer's conception of the folkloric 'prehistory' of *Nauigatio S. Brendani*:

---

5   See esp. McCone 1990, 3, where he suggests that the anti-nativist position only 'calls for *significant modification* of Dumézil's model' (my italics). *Cf.* Ó Corráin 1994, 25.

6   Jesse Byock (1992) has attributed a similar narrowness in the Icelandic counterpart to Irish anti-nativism to the role played in studies of early texts by those whose interests were principally institutional history, rather than a study of the social context of literature. One could possibly adduce a similar cause in the Irish case.

7   Tolkien 1936, 3-4: '*Beowulf* has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art'.

Modern writers on this subject all too commonly think in terms of 'compilers'. Denial of authorship is made, not always by downright and deliberate statement, but by the use of suggestive impersonal terms. A saga 'comes into being' by some vague process involving the communal will and the creative desire of the 'folk' and has a long life in a wild state to describe which biological terms are invariably used: hence the saga 'spreads', 'creeps', 'shoots forth' until it is finally 'domesticated', that is, given literary form at a particular time and in a particular place, thus entering on that phase of its existence where literary terms may be substituted for biological. (Carney 1963, in rpr. p. 45)

Literary works are works of creation and criticism must be something more than quarrying. Yet it would be arguable that anti-nativism has led to little more than reattribution of texts to a new 'class' of authors: clerical, rather than Druidic—or the 'shared learned class' of Ó Corráin. The 'class' migrates from one state to the other, but corporately. Has this restored agency to the author?

II

Anti-nativism is in some ways an idealist construct. At first glance this would seem improbable, allowing that most of its proponents accept a model of Indo-European philology that supposes an existence of a language and associated culture in a real past. Yet Indo-European prehistory is itself an idealist vision. Past abuses of scholarship discourage attempts to connect philological and archaeological models to create a consistent vision of the Indo-European past—if that is indeed possible. We are left with textual and archaeological approaches that are often focused on different questions and which make the past recovered from texts an uncertain place.

Archaeological analogues nonetheless could help us to focus on a 'real' past that subverts some of the terms of anti-nativism. The archaeologist, unlike the Northern European text scholar, does not have the privilege of pretending that everything before the beginning of the textual record is simply beyond recovery. When one is studying an Iron Age burial in North Britain one can be confident in envisaging the construction of the ditch and mound which marks the grave being carried out by people who believed in a primal Celtic religion and whose cosmology was unaffected by Christian notions. This is, you may be surprised to know, a liberating feeling!

Some of the archaeologists' problems of evidence are comparable to ours. For example, one of the similarities between the textual and the archaeological record in Celtic Britain is the thinness of recognisable evidence for the fifth and sixth centuries. On many western British, Irish and Scottish sites, the diagnostic artefacts for the sixth and seventh centuries were the ceramic types 'B' ware and 'E' ware, rather singular series of durable coarse-wares, imported in fairly short floruits

centring on the 520s and mid-600s, respectively (Wooding 1996, Ch. 4). When one dug below the B ware horizon one sometimes came into occupation layers that were, by implication, earlier than B ware. But how much earlier? At Whithorn, for example, we could go back further than the early 500s. How much earlier would have real implications for whether the church at Whithorn was founded as early as the lifetime of St Martin, as Ninian's *Vita* claims, or only as late as the 500s— where Alan MacQuarrie has, for example, looked to place it (Macquarrie 1987, 1-25).

The study of *Quellenkritik* is well to be understood in archaeological terms: it is a study, in reverse order of depostion, of strata of text. The archaeologist is subject to the tendency to focus on what he or she recognises, at the expense of that which he or she does not. This is the same situation as for the text scholar. When we have excavated to the bottom of our texts we find ourselves with potentially earlier layers than those we can date, and with artefacts (a charm, for example, is reasonably described in such terms) that we can't classify. How early are these? How do we date them? In what cultural context do they belong? Like the text scholar, the archaeologist is stuck with what he or she can recognise. A welter of 'sub-Roman' objects—pins, brooches etc.—come from the fifth century, but even with the recent noble work of Sue Youngs and Raghnall Ó Flóinn, the chronological value of these is vitiated by the process of recovery of these objects (metal detection or antiquarian excavation) and the residuality of such items (unlike pots they don't break quickly and are more likely to be heirlooms) (Ó Floinn 2001, 1-14; Youngs 1995, 127-130).

James Dunn, in a study of the Q hypothesis in Biblical studies, has drawn some meaningful archaeological analogues of *Quellenkritik*:

The archaeological imagery of an *lowest* 'stratum', capable of being uncovered by 'excavation' almost unavoidably promotes the implication of an *earliest* stratum, a stratum which contains the earliest artefacts of the literary 'tell', known as Q. (Dunn 2005, 46)

The unitary character of this lowest layer is understood by Dunn to be a potential myth: a projection of literary scholarship back upon what might be a collection of possibly oral sources. Training as text critics thus inspires a default assumption of an *Ur*-text or a unified literary culture. It can easily lead to a failure to consider the world beyond the text.

Support by scholars of theology for the anti-nativist paradigm may also reflect disciplinary prejudices in what they are able to recognise. Neil Faulkner, on the archaeological side, has recently described a similar prejudice, which he terms the 'Late-Antiquity Paradigm'(LAP): an over-emphasis on evidence for Roman continuities (such as the evidence of B ware), after the model of Pirenne, at the expense of a less identifiable or quantifiable local culture—which should, in the

case of the barely-Romanised Celtic West, be substantial (Faulkner 2004, 5-12). Faulkner, aiming his strictures especially at the work of Kenneth Dark and those, such as Anthea Harris, who follow Dark's views, has argued that the native content in the post-Roman West has been overemphasised, with the less easily identified local element in culture down-played (Dark 1994; Harris 2003). I don't entirely agree with Faulkner, but it is a salutary critique.[8] The issue here is that we focus on the most visible element in our assemblages, which we recognise because we know it in the Mediterranean, but it may not be the only, or the most significant element in the assemblage. Our B-ware amphorae are crucial for dating, but do they really speak to a continuing Roman culture? The same question applies, I think, to what we can recognise in texts. It is salutary to be reminded that to focus on the recognisably Roman and Christian element in early British culture may reflect a colonialist perspective.[9]

Faulkner's model arises out of a recent theoretical paradigm that tends to champion the local complex over larger unitary and diffused cultures. There are a great many wider questions tied up in this debate: for example whether there is a dialectical role to archaeological approaches, to champion the majority culture of ordinary people, as against the aristocratic, Christian, and/or militarist preoccupations of a historicist approach. The simple, and unsurprising, truth is that the past is contested by politicised interpretive paradigms.

III

David Dumville has suggested that the real roots of nativism can be found in an 'passion for orality' in Celtic studies that emerged in the 1930s (Dumville 1996, 390). This is doubtless true, but the roots of this interest began earlier, in the formative period of Ireland's modern nationhood. 'Nativism' was a condition of cultural politics arising from the struggles of the early twentieth century that manifested itself in Irish studies in general. The Australian critic Sam Porter sees 'nativism' in such modern literature from Ireland as depicts 'an essential native

---

8   Not least because he reflects some of the same concerns I noted in my 1996 monograph (Wooding 1996, 54) highlighting the contrast between the usefulness of the imports as dating evidence and the possibly limited cultural impact of the imports themselves.

9   *Cf.* the studies of Mortimer Wheeler, who in concentrating on the interface between Roman and local culture for largely chronological purposes—*i.e.* using the better-known Roman finds in Iron Age Britain and in India to date local sequences—was seen as guilty of such colonialist pre-occupations (and, as 'Lt Colonel Wheeler', of military bias as well): Hawkes 1982, 172-77, 238-40, 256-7; Wheeler 1954. On a different note Patrick Sims-Williams has suggested that the current 'Celtoscepticism' trend occasionally has the air of denying the identity of oppressed minorities: Sims-Williams 1998, 3; also see Wooding 2002, 59.

community and its culture as having survived the colonial onslaught intact to remain the authentic and exclusive source of Irishness' (Porter 1992, 174). It is an inversion of the colonial process, a setting up a reactionary exclusivity of culture to that of the imperialists; in Porter's words 'a progressive decolonizing politics' (Porter 1992, 174).

A focused study of the cultural politics of early Irish studies around the time of the foundation of the Irish Free State can show the roots of nativism. Philip O'Leary's studies of prose literature identify the extent to which early Irish literature figured in the political vision of the period (O'Leary 1994; 2004). Nativism of the sort Porter describes is clearly evident in the advocacy of early Irish literature in the Gaelic press by Patrick Pearse and Tadhg Ó Donnchada (O'Leary 1994, 268-9). Key Irish politicians were literary men with a professional interest in the early literature: Douglas Hyde was the first president of the Free State, Eoin Mac Neill the first speaker of the Dáil. Other academics came from influential families. Mac Neill's deputy Pádraig Ó Máille was the brother of the Galway professor of Old Irish [Sean-] Tomás Ó Máille. Miles Dillon's father and grandfather were two of Ireland's most notable political figures. Binchy was ambassador to Germany in the 1930s. Anyone who has spent time in the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies is easily reminded of a time when early Irish studies was hard-wired to the highest circles of Irish politics. Thus persons involved in the foundation of the modern Irish state embodied in their actions as critics the desires for a separate Irish state with an ancient cultural dignity, shared with its neighbours, but not immediately dependent on them. Political support was uneven, often individual, occasionally ignorant, but the passion for orality and a native past can be linked to mainstream political discourses (Bríody 2007, 45-7).

In this light, it is especially instructive to consider the parallels to anti-nativism which took place across a similar period in studies of other early literatures of decolonising states. A useful comparison is that in Icelandic studies which has been termed the 'bookprosist' or 'Icelandic School'.[10] The parallels of the specific problem have been noted (McCone, 1990, 19, 52), but even more interesting, perhaps, are the parallels in terms of cultural and academic politics. Many of the roles in the bookprose debate are comparable to the Irish nativism debate: an early focus on folkloric perspectives in the person of Finnur Jónsson; a pioneering rebellion against the 'oral literature' assumption in the work of the philologist Sigurdur Nordal, who was strongly supported by the historian Jón Johanesson—in an environment in which historians engaged directly with the publication of the *monumenta* of the nation (Byock 1992). It is easy to identify counterparts to these figures in the Irish debate. Byock has argued that the bookprosist's theorising arose

---

10   Comparisons in politics in general between the two nations are informative. See, recently: Sigrdsson 2004, 79-92.

out of a desire for cultural ownership: in a climate of Icelandic nationalism, the retreat from a belief that sagas described a shared Scandinavian past was seen to return the ownership of these tales to Iceland, paralleling the journey actually made by many MSS from Copenhagen to Reykjavík. It moreover returned agency to the authors, also Icelanders, who were retrieved from their roles as mere redactors of oral tradition.[11] In other words, Byock's thesis is that the bookprosists's polemic is inseparable from their political environment. This political environment was a colonial one and the bookprosists desired to avoid the scenario in which these texts were part of a shared 'Scandinavian' heritage or orality.

Though early Irish nationalists tended to champion orality, whereas Icelandic ones rejected it, the underlying motivations for the oral/written dichotomy there were similar. In the Irish case an origin in a distant Indo-European past was a venerable antiquity that allowed Ireland the status of a keeper of a very ancient culture, shared as much with India—which was also a British colony moving to independence—as with nearer neighbours. The polemic which Carney initiated attacked the selectivity of the assumptions concerning when Ireland was and was not in contact with external ideas; some of its weaknesses lie in the fact that the alternatives offered are equally selective (see Ó Corráin, above).[12] The tide has recently turned against the bookprosists, with a return to belief in the validity of oral traditions as sources of some sagas. Some of the test-cases for this, such as Ólafur Haldorsson's assault on Johanesson's single-source hypothesis for *Grænlendinga Saga*, remain in my opinion open to further interpretation, but there has been a consensus that the bookprosist's position was too limited and too inclined to treat the absence of evidence for orality as evidence of its absence.[13] I suspect this is the direction in which the Irish debate will ultimately move.

The belief in philological 'excavation' of a putative prehistoric past—what Tom Shippey has rather nicely termed 'asterisk reality' (not to be confused with Asterix the Gaul, but referring to the use of asterisks for reconstructed IE words), is a related cause of nativism (Shippey 1994, Ch. 1). The rootedness of Celtic scholarship in comparative philology leads anti-nativists to make counter-arguments concerning past contact which are themselves selective. Ó Corráin criticises McCone's resort to Indo-European theories; his preferred alternative, the Neolithic, appears to allude to M.J. O'Kelly's belief that pseudo-historical deities such as the proprietors of the *síd* at Newgrange were references to Neolithic cults. Cathy Swift has most recently pointed out the greater logic of associating these legends with later Iron Age deities (Swift 2003, 53-63). The related debates over how 'Celtic' Ireland was

---

11 Byock 1992, 44-59.
12 Also see the debate on when Irish history 'begins': Jackson 1964 (*cf.* Mallory 1987, 33-65); Binchy 1975, 119-132; Byrne 1971, 128-166; Mac Neill 1906, 1-18.
13 See Sims-Williams 1996, 182.

in the late Iron Age may are based on the quantification of the La Tène element in Irish culture, but their problematic is exactly the same as the 'magic' vs. religion debate in early Irish studies (Raftery 1994; Mackey 1992b, 66-83). At issue is how much the Irish—that is, those who are the academic spokespersons of the nation—want to be seen as part of a larger cultural whole in antiquity. Whether this whole be Roman or La Tène, the same questions are at issue.

IV

As Kim McCone has recently raised the issue of Immram Brain, I will use this as a very brief case study of where I see the problems of anti-nativism most clearly (McCone 2001). I too have been recently excavating this text to explain its relationships with Christian literature—most particular Nauigatio S. Brendani, with which it is quite obviously related, though how is rather less obvious—and Carney's interests were also long focused on Immram Brain. I have managed to nail down quite a lot of aspects of the interrelationships of these texts that help define their shared notion of a 'promised land' as being primarily explicable in Christian terms and the context of their writing reducible to the time when Irish monks were exploring the Atlantic islands. One can sketch a case in which the Mosaic parallels of the tale would be at the fore. Manannán walks over a plain that is simultaneously sea to a paradise: he is the God who can make the sea dry for the entry into the desert (cf. the location of Brendan's voyage, which is clearly a simulacrum of the desert of the Pentateuch). Manannán's son Mongán parallels Christ typologically in the same way as Moses does. Did the Irish author take motifs from local mythology as cues for alternative, local, doublets of Old Testament narratives for Ireland? I suspect so. But one also sympathises with Alwyn Rees's position:

If his [Carney's] assertion that the Voyage of Bran is 'from beginning to end, a thoroughly Christian poem' is to be accepted, one can only wonder what Christianity is about.[14]

I agree. I can sketch all the parallels of Mongán with Christ. I can explain the gems and the giant tree of the distant island as Christian symbols. At a certain point, however, I have to tackle more than the individual motifs. What does it mean? Is it valid to assume that a few Christian ideas make every motif presumed to be Christian? Only if the premise is valid that there is no proof that there was any pre-Christian notion of religious islands or a paradise in the ocean.

Here we can note some evidence that shows that religious islands existed outside the text. In the first century AD Plutarch, in his dialogue on the defunct oracles,

---

14   Rees 1966, 42.

tells the story of Demetrius's visit to the islands of Britain. Strabo and Pomponius Mela, write of islands off the coast of Gaul in which gods and priestesses live.[15] These accounts, all written around the same time, probably share common sources. Though they are written after the birth of Christ, they are certainly *not* written by Christian monks. If we found this description in a medieval Irish text we would naturally assume this scene is a back-formation from Christian monasticism. It cannot be. It is useful to raise this one case to make the point that the historian of religion is not absolutely dependent on Christian sources to understand the primal past of Britain and Ireland; it may justify further, counterfactual, approaches to the problem of the indivisibility of our accounts of the insular past from Christian perspectives.

V

The paradigm-shift, if that is really what it is, was a product of debate, arising first in the 1950s, and strongly pursued anew in the mid-1980s through '90s. In the foregoing I have highlighted some ways in which it is susceptible to a post-colonial critique. Other critiques could also be made from a theoretical perspective.

In fact a concerted response has been lacking by those sympathetic to the nativist position partly because there was, in fact, no concerted nativist 'school'. Many of the main targets for criticism were either already dead by the mid-1980s—or in the case of Binchy of very advanced years. The roots of nativism were in a textual hermeneutic and a corpus of student texts both of which had been established in the early twentieth century. James Mackey's attempt to provide a response from the perspective of religious studies became mired in the minutiae of the 'monastic church' debate.[16] Strong criticisms of McCone's work, in particular by David Dumville and Patrick Sims-Williams, were by scholars who were actually not out of sympathy with the main complaint of Carney. Indeed one can only agree with the anti-nativists that an appreciation of the Christian element in Celtic literature is essential. Some past editors have gone to texts with little more than a copy of the shorter western canon and maybe James's *Apocryphal New Testament*. We need richer approaches to Christian content.

Before we who teach religious approaches get too self-righteous, however, it may be that an excessively theological interpretation of *Quellenkritik* was in the

---

15   Plutarch, *De defectu oraculorum*, ed. Babbitt 1936, 402-5; also Pomponius Mela, *De cho-rographia* III:6—also see Burn 1969, 2-6; Mac Cana 1976, 112. The specific question as to whether Mela's island is the 'Land of Women' of *Immram Brain* should not distract us from the wider point that there is a sacred quality to offshore islands in these antique works.

16   Mackey 1992a, 285-297.

first place responsible for some of the worst problems of past approaches. People whose everyday work was monasticism were often subtle in their use of patristic sources—which I feel they did not treat according to the same rules as Matthew treated Q. Perhaps the lesson of anti-nativism is not that everything is of Christian origin, but that early medieval writers were more open to interpreting their material than we have acknowledged; we return here to Rees' question of what Christianity is about. The dogmatic search for mergers of learned classes—people who knew the 'rules' of both traditions—is a potential trap. Another is the search for 'Irish' Druids as against 'Celtic' Druids. In the early middle ages the church formed itself differently in different regions (Brown 2003). The religions it encountered were not themselves 'churches'. Perhaps one didn't always have to work by the rules of institutions, and perhaps institutional mergers were not required to produce new interpretations of the religious past. Such models may reflect modern cultural ideas more than past ones.

Bibliography

Babbit, F.C. 1936. *Plutarch, Moralia*, vol. 5, Cambridge MA: Loeb.

Binchy, D. 1975. 'The Passing of the Old Order'. In B. Ó Cuív (ed.) *The Impact of the Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic Speaking Peoples*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 119-132.

Breatnach, L. 1984. 'Canon and Secular Law in early Ireland: the Significance of Bretha Nemed', *Peritia* 3, 439-59.

Brown, P.R.L. 2003. *The Rise of Western Christendom,* 2nd Edition London: Blackwell.

Burn, A.R. 1969. 'Holy Men on Islands in pre-Christian Britain', *Glasgow Archaeological Journal* 1, 2-6.

Byock, J. 1992. 'History and the Sagas: the Effect of Nationalism', in Gisli Pálsson (ed.) *From Sagas to Society, Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*. Enfield Lock UK, 44-59.

Byrne, F.J. 1971. 'Tribes and Tribalism in Early Ireland', *Ériu* 22, 128-166.

Byrne, M.E. 1932. 'On the Punishment of Sending Adrift', *Ériu* 11, 97-102.

Carey, J. 2001. *The Single Ray of the Sun*. Aberystwyth & Andover: Celtic studies publications.

Carey, J. 1995. 'Native Elements in Irish Pseudo-History'. In D. Edel (ed.) *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 45-60.

Carney, J. 1963. 'Review of Selmer, *Navigatio*', *Medium Ævum* 32, 37-44; rpr. in J. Wooding (ed.) *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature—An Anthology of Criticism*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 42-51.

Carney, J. 1955. *Studies in Early Irish Literature and History*. Dublin: The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Dark, K. 1994. *Civitas to Kingdom*. London: Continuum.

Dumville, D. 1996. 'Review of *Pagan Past and Christian Present*', *Peritia* 10, 389-398.

Dunn, J.G. 2005. 'Q¹ as Oral Tradition'. In M. Bockmuehl & D. Hagner (eds) *The Written Gospel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 45-69.

Faulkner, N. 2004. 'The Case for the Dark Ages'. In R. Collins & J. Gerrard (eds) *Debating Late Antiquity in Britain AD 300-700*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 5-12.

Harris, A. 2003. *Byzantium, Britain and the West: The Archaeology of Cultural Identity AD 400-800*. Stroud: Tempus.

Hawkes, J. 1982. *Mortimer Wheeler.* London: Weidenfield.

Jackson, K. 1964. *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mac Cana, P. 1976. 'The Sinless Otherworld of *Immram Brain', Ériu* 27, 95-115.

Mac Cana, P. 1975. 'On the "Prehistory" of *Immram Brain', Ériu* 26, 33-52; rpr. in J. Wooding (ed.) *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature—An Anthology of Criticism.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 52-72.

Mac Cana, P. 1972. 'Mongán Mac Fiachna and *Immram Brain', Ériu* 23, 102-142.

Mac Cana, P. 1958. *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr: A study of the Irish Affinities.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Mackey, J.P. 1992a. 'Christian Past and Primal Present', *Études celtiques* 29, 285-297.

Mackey, J.P. 1992b. 'Magic and Primal Religion', *ZCP* 45, 66-83.

MacNeill, E. 1906. 'Where Does Irish History Begin', *New Ireland Review* 25, 1-18; rpr. as Ch. 1 of *idem, Celtic* Ireland. Dublin, 1921; also rpr. Appendix 2 of F.X. Martin & F.J. Byrne, *The Scholar Revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill 1867-1945 and the Making of the New Ireland.* Shannon, 1973.

Macquarrie, A. 1987. 'The Date of St Ninian's Mission: A Reappraisal', *Review of the Scottish Church History Society* 23, 1-25.

Mallory, J.P. 1987. 'Silver in the Ulster Cycle of Tales'. In D. Ellis Evans (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies*. Oxford, 33-65.

McCone, K. 1990. *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*. Maynooth Monographs 3. Maynooth: Department of Old Irish, National University of Ireland.

McCone, K. 2001. *Echtra Chonnlai and the beginnings of Narrative Literature in the Irish Language*. Maynooth: Department of Old Irish, National University of Ireland.

Murphy, G. 1955. 'Review of Early Irish Literature and History', *Éigse* 8, 152-64.

Ó Cathasaigh, T. 1995. 'Early Irish Narrative Literature'. In K. McCone & K. Simms (eds.) *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies*. Maynooth: Department of Old Irish, St. Patrick's college 55-64

Ó Corráin, D. 1994. 'Early Irish history: Some points for debate', *Newsletter of the School of Celtic Studies* 7, 25-27.

Ó Corráin, D., L. Breatnach & A. Breen. 1984. 'The Laws of the Irish', *Peritia* 3, 382-438.

Ó Corráin, D., L. Breatnach & K. McCone 1989. *Sages, Saints and Storytellers*. Maynooth Monographs 2. Maynooth: Department of Old Irish, National University of Ireland.

Ó Floinn, R. 2001. 'Patrons and Politics: Art, Artefact and Methodology'. In M. Redknap, N. Edwards *et al.* (eds), *Pattern and Purpose in Insular Art*. Oxford: Oxbow, 1-14.

O'Leary, P. 1994. *The Prose Literatuire of the Gaelic Revival.* University Park PA.

O'Leary, P. 2004. *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State 1922-1939.* University Park PA

Porter, S. 1992. 'The Cultural Politics of Nativism: in the Short Stories of Daniel Corkery'. In P. Bull, C. McConville & N. McLachlan (eds) *Irish-Australian Studies: Papers Delivered to the Sixth Irish-Australian Conference*. Bundoora Vic., 174-84.

Raftery, B. 1994. *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Rees, A. 1966. 'Modern Evaluations of Celtic Narrative Literature'. In *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Celtic* Studies. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 31-61.

Seymour, St John D. 1930. *Irish Visions of the Otherworld*. London 1930.

Shippey, T. 1994. *The Road to Middle Earth*. London, 2nd Edition.

Sigurdsson, D. L. 2004. '"A parallel much closer": The 1918 Act of Union between Iceland and Denmark and Ireland's Relations with Britain', *Irish Historical Studies* 34, 79-92.

Sims-Williams, P. 1998. 'Celts and Celtoscepticism', *CMCS* 36, 1-35.

Sims-Williams, P. 1996. 'Review of *Pagan Past and Christian Present*', *Éigse* 29, 179-196.

Sjöblom, T. 2004. 'Mind Stories: A Cognitive Approach to the Role of Narratives in Early Irish Tradition', *CMCS* 47, 59-72.

Swift, C. 2003. 'The Gods of Newgrange in Irish Literature and Romano-Celtic Tradition'. in G. Burenhult & S. Westergaard (eds) *Stones and Bones*. BAR. Int. Series 1201. Oxford, 53-63.

Thrall, W.F. 1923. 'Clerical Sea Pilgrimages and the *Imrama*'. In *The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature*. Chicago, 1923; rpnt New York, 1968, 276-83.

Thrall, W.F. 1917-1918. 'Virgil's *Aeneid* and the Irish *Imrama:* Zimmer's Theory', *Modern Philology* 15, 449-474.

Thurneysen, R. 1921. *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*. Halle: M. Niemeyer.

Tolkien, J.R.R. 1936. 'Beowulf: the Monster and the Critics', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22. London; reprint Oxford, 1977.

Wheeler, R.E.M. 1954. *Rome beyond Imperial Frontiers*. London: Bell.

Wooding, J.M. 2005. 'The Munster Element in *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*', *Journal of the Cork Archaeological and Historical Society* 110, 53-66.

Wooding, J.M. 2002. 'The Idea of the Celt'. In M. Atherton (ed.) *Celts and Christians: new Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 39-59.

Wooding, J.M. 1996. *Communication and Commerce along the Western Sealanes AD400-800*. Oxford: BAR International Series 654.

Youngs, S. 1995. 'A Penannular Brooch from near Calne, Wiltshire', *The Wiltshire Archaeology and Natural History Magazine* 88, 127-30.