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ENGLISH OR IRISH? CULTURAL NATIONALIST IDEOLOGY IN LATE 19TH-CENTURY IRELAND

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Abstract: *In modern history Northern Ireland has been home to uneasy community relations. The construction of a collective identity which embraces ethnic and religious diversity, and attracts the politically antagonized protestant and catholic communities seems to be a key to the settlement of conflicts. One of the factors preventing a firmly established inclusive Northern Irish identity is disorientation among protestants concerning their national belonging. Although by now it is only political loyalty to the United Kingdom that most Ulster Protestants share in a sense if Britishness, they also feel distanced from a communion with Irishness. Some academics argue that the present alienation of Northern Protestants from Irish culture results from the policy of the early Irish Free State which in the 1920s restricted the scope of Irishness to the catholic population. In fact, a deeper insight into Irish nationalism at the turn of the 20th century will reveal that several leading intellectuals preoccupied with the construction of a liberated identity for a culturally and linguistically colonized Irish nation were, in fact, protestants. Drawing a conclusion from the failure of previous fights for political freedom, these protestant intellectuals attempted to define the Irish nation in a cultural sense thus aiming to shape an independent Irish self-consciousness. The following paper is concerned with approaches to an ethnically and religiously inclusive Irish identity present in protestant writings of a cultural-nationalistic orientation at the dawn of the 20th century, and explores those linguistic identities the authors, in their different nation-versions, associate with a culturally sovereign but largely English-speaking Irish population.*

Keywords: *Ireland, Irish, English, national language, native tongue, national identity, cultural and linguistic nationalism, protestant.*

1. Introduction. The transformation of protestant identity and the rise of cultural nationalism in late 19th-century Ireland

The Irish language movement, gaining new momentum in the 1970s and spreading over both the northern and the southern states of Ireland, is primarily associated with the catholic population. This view seems to be underscored by survey figures which, for instance, indicated as few as 5,500 protestant Irish speakers from a Northern Irish population of over 1.5 million in the early 1990s (in Pintér 165-166). By contrast, the Irish

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cultural and language revival movement which came into life in the late 19th century had Anglo-Irish protestants in its leadership, and appealed to wide protestant circles. Evidence of the latter was a public meeting in April 1899 held in support of a demand for the teaching of Irish in national schools where "all classes and creeds were represented […]. The Cardinal Primate sent his most earnest sympathy, while an MA of Trinity College [Dublin] proposed the first resolution [and], Nationalists and Unionists, Protestants and Catholics, were equally earnest in their advocacy of the language." There was also a letter sent by the Protestant Bishop of Ossory declaring his approval of a platform "on which all lovers of our dear native land could meet as nationalists in the truest sense of the word" (in Nowlan 45).

With regard to this significant change in the Irish language loyalty of the protestant population in about one hundred years, Terence Brown ("British Ireland" 73-75) observes that in post-partition Northern Ireland Unionist Protestants lost or abandoned their previous Irish self-perception and constructed a "British Ireland" identity. Brown argues that this transformation of identity was a reaction to "a narrow, largely Catholic and aggressively Gaelic version of Irish identity" which gained ground in the Irish Free State from the 1920s. Northern Protestants felt that the southern, overwhelmingly catholic state deprived them of an all-Ireland cultural consciousness that they still considered to be their own in the early 20th century despite their political affiliation to Britain.

Norman Vance (165-175), on the other hand, originates northern protestant "sectarianism" in what he claims to be features of cultural-nationalist tendencies characterizing Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Vance, W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, as well as the "extremely Anglophobic" Douglas Hyde made "fatally divisive cultural choices" when introducing "the habit of defining what was 'Irish' and 'national'" because "too much was likely to be classified as 'un-Irish'" and because this "bipolar rhetoric" reduced the Anglo-Irish and the Scots-Irish to "mere Celtic anti-types." Thus the ideologists of the Irish Revival created "particularist myths of identity which only reinforced existing divisions in the country and postponed its coming of age as a modern nation almost indefinitely." Also, they generated a long-term "counter-culture" in Northern Ireland, which was just further strengthened in response to the exclusivist policy of the Irish Free State.

At this point the question arises why protestants with British roots took the lead in the popularization of cultural and linguistic nationalism in an Ireland of catholic majority. The answer to this question lies in the changing social status of the Irish protestant population in the 19th century. After the 1829 Catholic Emancipation, the Irish protestant community, particularly its dominant Anglican elite, experienced successive power crises. In 1869 the Anglican Church of Ireland was disestablished, and this was compounded by growing religious scepticism and secularism in a new generation of Anglicans due to the spread of Darwinian ideas. On the other hand, the political leaders of Catholic Ireland increasingly looked upon the Anglo-Irish protestant world as an alien culture.

In fact, several dominant figures and writers of Irish cultural nationalism came from deeply religious protestant families, often with ecclesiastical or rectory backgrounds (Kiberd 422-423). Vivien

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Mercier's ironic remark proves telling in this respect: "[The] purpose of the Irish Literary Revival was to provide alternative employment for the sons of clergymen after disestablishment had reduced the number of livings provided by the Church of Ireland" (in Kiberd 423).

It seems that the incapability of embracing the faith of their fathers along traditional lines and the refusal "to follow the clergyman's calling" implied a quest for a new identity by "the scions of the rectory" (Kiberd 424). Ciarán Benson's (316-330) analogy between psychological processes underlying a nation's as well as an individual's efforts to gain their own identity serves to highlight the link between the decline of a traditional protestant self-perception and the search for a new self by younger generation protestants. As Benson sees it psychological processes of national and individual self-definition are dominated by the ability of the nation and of the individual aspiring for a place in the nation to integrate their own plurality. Both the national and the individual 'ego' comprises a community of various selves in constant conversation and often in conflict. Although the resultant internal tension, temporality and changeability make the overall self an intrinsically social process, both the nation and the individual are constantly struggling for the integration and stability of their respective overall selves.

Projecting Benson's line of thought over late 19th-century Ireland, Irish protestants interested in cultural nationalism were primarily trying to re-define their insecure identity, which necessitated the re-positioning of their own self within the Irish nation. This, however, required the creation of a national image which organically integrated their own social circle. Consequently, they constructed the concept of an inclusive Irish culture-nation which tolerated religious, political and ethnic plurality.

Several of the protestant intellectuals abandoning "God's call" sought to balance their identity-deficit in movements which provided cultural and literary activities with social and national significance. The three centres of gravitation shaping protestant attitude to Irish culture in late 19th-century Ireland were the Trinity College of Dublin, the Literary Revival Movement and the Gaelic League.

2. Trinity and the Cosmopolitans

Since its foundation, the Trinity College of Dublin had maintained complicated links with Irishness and Irish culture. Ireland's first university was established by the Tudor conqueror Elizabeth I in the late 16th century, and the institution remained the bastion of the Anglican Ascendancy and dominant English culture in the following centuries. Nevertheless, Henry Grattan, Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet and Thomas Davis, protestants instrumental in shaping modern Irish nationalism, all attended Trinity (Rollestone 973). It was also at Trinity that antiquarian interest and philological research in Irish culture and language gravitated in the late 18th century. This tradition of the College was then followed in the 19th century by such protestant figures of the Gaelic Revival as Standish O'Grady and Douglas Hyde, both Trinity graduates. However, certain leading lecturers and researchers of the College developed an impatient and arrogantly dismissive attitude towards the cultural revival movement for its alleged pretentiousness and narrow provincialism. As Lady Gregory put it, "the Chinese Wall […] separates Trinity College from Ireland (in Vance 167).

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Although both groups belonged to the Anglo-Irish elite, a clear division has been established between the movement centred around William Butler Yeats and Douglas Hyde, and the circle of Trinity intellectuals, labeling the former as 'national' and the latter as 'cosmopolitan' (see Brown "Cultural Nationalism" 517, Kiberd 156-57, Vance 167-168). A critical controversy of the Literary Revival launched between W. B. Yeats and Trinity cosmopolitan John Eglinton in the columns of the Dublin *Daily Express* in 1898 focused on what should be the subject of modern Irish literature (Deane 956). Whereas both Yeats and Eglinton considered English to be the most suitable means of modern literary expression in Ireland, Yeats maintained that Irish literature should be about great themes of the nation's past, but Eglinton insisted that modern Irish literature, like all great literature, should deal with universal human questions.

In Yeats's argument the 'seer' poet is able to reveal and revitalize the hidden world of ancient Celtic legends in a way that will make the beauty and magic accumulated in them have a universal appeal, making Irish literature truly modern (Yeats "John Eglinton" 960-961). This Yeatsian thought echoes Standish O'Grady, who, as a renowned literary translator of the Revival, was convinced that ancient Celtic legends represent the imagination, ambitions and ideals of the Irish people, and that they have "a value far beyond the tale of actual events and duly recorded deeds." Thus their recreation in English will awaken the nation's imagination and set out modern national literature on its way (O'Grady 523-525). Eglinton, on the other hand, thought that Irish patriotism should look into the future, not into the past; and that modern Irish literature "must spring from a native interest in life", its "simple and universal" facts and "a strong capacity for life among the people." As he saw it, the ancient legends of Ireland "obstinately refuse to be taken up out of their old environment and be transplanted into the world of modern sympathies" (Eglinton "National Drama" 957).

Eglinton's ideas also reflect the search of the protestant mind for the most suitable form to express the nation's and his own identity. But while investigating an appropriate literary representation of the modern Irish nation, he distances himself from anything traditionally Irish, and does not embrace, like Yeats or Hyde, the fusion of the two – Irish-Catholic and British-Protestant – traditions. Although Eglinton did not regard his critical stance to the Revival incompatible with his 'Irishness' (Deane 1018), his views expounded in *Bards and Saints* about Irish culture and language reflect the paternalistic attitude of the English colonizer. He describes the Anglo-Irish as "the heirs of a superior culture", and identifies the Irish language with the isolated and backward "peasant hinterland" (Eglinton "Bards and Saints" 71-74). Eglinton evokes the self-justifying ideology of the Anglo-Saxon empire builder carrying the white man's burden when he writes that "it is fitting that the peasantry should have the language of a superior culture imposed upon them. Where the peasantry, or the main body of a population, receives that superior culture and civilization, the product is a genuine nationality" (Eglinton "Bards and Saints" 71).

Despite the fact that Eglinton did not speak Irish, he claimed that it "lacked analytic power" and "had never been to school" (in Kiberd 157). On this ground he dismissed Douglas Hyde's language-

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saving Gaelic League, arguing that " it is by a 'thought movement' rather than by a 'language movement' that Ireland will have to show that it holds the germs of true nationality." In his view the League was dragging the language "from obscurity in the hovels of the West[ern countryside], like the forgotten representative of some old dynasty" ("Bards and Saints" 72). Eglinton feared that the revival of Irish would intellectually isolate Ireland from Europe, condemning the "Irishman to speak in his national rather than in his human capacity" ("Bards and Saints" 73). By claiming that "the ancient language of the Celt is no longer the language of Irish nationality. And in fact it never was"("Bards and Saints" 70) he disrupted common roots between Irish language and nation, and connected the formation of the latter to its absorption of English-language culture.

3. William Butler Yeats and the Literary Revival

Trinity cosmopolitans saw further integration with Great Britain as a guarantee of Ireland's modernization. By contrast, Yeatsian cultural nationalists of the Irish Literary Society, London, and of the National Literary Society, Dublin advocated a return to Ireland's Gaelic tradition, to the energies of the "source." They suggested that "moulding anew" ancient legend, tradition and literature would produce the right "utterance of national life" (Yeats "Literary Movement" 39), and that a rediscovery of the riches of old Gaelic literature "would generate a sense of national self-worth and of organic unity" (Brown "Cultural Nationalism" 516). Yeats did not refrain from cultural chauvinistic remarks either:

> Alone among nations, Ireland has in her written Gaelic literature […], the forms in which the imagination of Europe uttered itself before Greece shaped a tumult of legend into her music of arts; […] The legends of other European countries are less numerous, and not so full of energies from which the arts and our understanding of their sanctity arose." (Yeats "Literary Movement" 42)

Yeats's emphasis on the European values of Irish tradition could serve to construct a European-Irish identity, liberated from its British chains. In addition, the return to an ancient, all-Irish cultural source could encourage the accommodation of an identity embracing socio-cultural plurality. Yeats believed that the message of pre-colonial Ireland free of ethnic and religious divisions would make the thinking of modern individuals receptive of diversity, thus stretching the limits of their identity. In his essay entitled *Magic* Yeats writes: "I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times. [The first of which is that] the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy" (62).

A major dilemma for Yeats was finding the language that would authentically express the identity of a modern, inclusive Irish nation. In fact, Yeats's Irish Literary Revival Movement "sought to supply the Ireland of the late 19th and early 20th century with a sense of its own distinctive identity through the medium of the English language" (Brown "Cultural Nationalism" 516). This approach appears reasonable for shaping the self-perception of a population which had, over centuries of colonization, shifted from Irish-Gaelic to English speech.

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Nevertheless, this Irish-English duality required theoretical reconciliation from cultural nationalists who claimed that there was inherent antagonism between Irish and English culture. In fact, this apparent contradiction was highlighted by Yeats in the following two questions: "Can we not build a national tradition, a national literature which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language" (in Kiberd 155)? and "Should [national literature] be written in the language that one's country does speak or the language it ought to speak" (in Kiberd 164)? Yeats's personal answer to these questions uncovers the dilemma of an Irish national writer with English as his mother tongue: "No man can think or write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue. […] Gaelic is my native language, but it is not my mother tongue" (in Kiberd 253). On a national level, Yeats tried to dissolve the seeming opposition between Irish nation and English language by shifting emphasis from language to a richness of emotion, love of colour, quickness of perception and spirituality as the "true marks" of Celtic nature, and by attempting to develop "sentimental connections" between the Anglo-Irish and the Irish nation (Cairns and Richards 67).

Yeats's flexible linguistic attitude also meant that he considered language retention important in the western countryside. There Gaelic linguistic continuity was accompanied by preserving Gaelic values and a tradition of life which existed in Ireland before Anglo-Saxon "commercialism" and "vulgarity" poured upon it (in Kiberd 139). With reference to the revival of Irish-Gaelic, Yeats welcomed the spread of the native tongue if it led to bilingualism. As he wrote: "We are preparing, as we hope, for a day when Ireland will speak in Gaelic […] within her borders, but speak, it may be, in English to other nations" (Yeats "Literary Movement" 39). Yeats never claimed that the restoration of Irish would cause isolation for the country but he considered English as a channel enabling the Irish to keep lively contacts with other peoples and integrate with European culture. As is revealed here, at the turn of the 20th century, Yeats regarded English as a potential *lingua franca* between nations. Reflecting upon Yeats's scheme about an English-language Irish national theatre in Dublin, Clement Shorter highlighted the importance of English as a channel to transmit Irish culture to other nations: "writing in English to capture the whole English-speaking world upon lines that were strictly Irish, […] the plays would be performed not only in Ireland, but in England, in America, and the Colonies" (Anonymous 51). Brown concludes that

> creating for the first time an indisputably Irish literature in the English language, these writers [of the Literary Revival] gave the Irish people to know that the language of their daily social intercourse [i.e. Irish-English] could be the basis of an internationally recognized body of creative writing. [But] most importantly of all it demonstrated that the English spoken in Ireland, by its long association with Irish speech patterns and modes of thought, could be the means whereby a society reflected on itself. (Brown "Cultural Nationalism" 520)

From among the varieties of English having evolved in Ireland over eight hundred years of colonial history, Hiberno-English showed the most similarity with

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Irish-Gaelic. Hiberno-English had been developed by Irish natives since the 17th century to facilitate communication with English-language settlers. By this process the Irish produced a "grafted English" which was comprehensible to other speakers of English but still showed Irish-Gaelic influence at every linguistic level, and truly reflected the cultural perspective, worldview and modes of thought of a people whose ancestral mother tongue was Irish (Todd 71-90). This form of speech showed conceptual harmony with Yeats's idea of expressing a genuine Irish identity in English. Consequently, while several Irish-Catholic nationalists despised Hiberno-English as a "hopeless half-way house" and a "bastard lingo" which is "neither good Irish nor good English", and celebrated Standard Irish as a discourse matching Standard English, Yeats crusaded for the formal recognition of Hiberno-English dialect, which, he said, was "an imitation of nothing English" but the only "good" English used by Irish masses, reflecting Irish thought (in Kiberd 173-174).

In fact, the claim that "Standard Irish" was the only "right" form of Irish imitated contemporaneous English linguistic attitudes. In late 19th- and early 20th-century England an obsession with "Standard English" as the only "correct" way to speak English also stigmatized non-standard varieties as "deviant" and "wrong" (Smyth 246-250). Yeats, however, called for a struggle against "traditional points of view", stating that Hiberno-English was a new linguistic idiom which "the Irish people themselves created", and which at its best was "more vigorous, fresh and simple than either of the two languages" between which it stood (in Kiberd 162-163).

4. Douglas Hyde, the Gaelic League and the "Irish Ireland" Idea

In cultural nationalist circles the most daring linguistic objective was envisaged by Douglas Hyde and the Gaelic League. They set out to restore the daily use of Irish for a population of which only 0.8 per cent was monoglot Irish speaker by the end of the 19th century (Denvir 1999: 20). Despite this fact, the Gaelic League, founded in 1893, became an all-Ireland mass movement by 1900. According to the League's leading principle saving the national identity of Ireland was unattainable through the medium of English. Consequently, they considered Irish speech vital to an authentic linguistic expression of Irishness.

Douglas Hyde, founder, and leader of the League until 1910, was also closely linked to Yeats's literary movement. He was one of those who called the Irish Literary Society to life, and in 1892 he became president of the National Literary Society. Although Hyde had been born to English speaking protestant parents in Western Sligo, he acquired Irish as a child from peasants in Roscommon County, and in his adult life he became an Irish-language enthusiast. In 1891 he wrote the first modern play in Irish (Foster 447), and his *The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland*, has been the most passionate lecture ever delivered in support of Irish-Gaelic. For Hyde Irish-Gaelic formed the cultural ground upon which a uniquely Irish identity could be constructed. In his line of thought cultural and linguistic decolonization meant the prerequisite for a sovereign nation. But to embrace Irish-Catholic as well as Anglo-Irish protestant, this decolonizing process had to be inclusive, and not exclusive, thus elevating the Irish people to a higher level of national existence.

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In order to decolonize Ireland in a cultural and linguistic sense, Hyde and the Gaelic Leaguers advocated a programme of restoring "Irish Ireland", where the revival of Irish-Gaelic was of central importance. In Hyde's words:

> I appeal to every one whatever his politics – for this is no political matter – to do his best to help the Irish race to develop in future upon Irish lines, even at the risk of encouraging national aspirations, because upon Irish lines alone can the Irish race once more become what it was yore – one of the most original, artistic, literary, and charming peoples of Europe. (Hyde 11)

The "Irish Ireland" idea rooted in a reaction to Ireland becoming part of a single, integrated cultural zone of which England was the centre, and Ireland, having lost its native tongue and tradition, was reduced to a mere imitation of Victorian England (O'Tuathaigh 56). The programme of "Irish Ireland" aimed at liberating Irish thought and mentality from a state of dependence on English culture. Consequently, Hyde avoided scapegoating the English for the loss of Irish identity. Instead, he blamed the Irish themselves who stick "in this half-way house", who "apparently hate the English", and decry their "vulgar" culture, but at the same time continue "to imitate" it; who "clamour for recognition as a distinct nationality", but at the same time throw away with both hands what would make them so (Hyde 2-3).

In Hyde's concept of "Irish Ireland" the Irish language was postulated as a binding force for the nation, but this had to face two obvious contradictions. Firstly, by the late 19th century the Irish population had largely become English speaking, and secondly, it held a fairly negative attitude to the ancient language. Beyond this, English was the printed medium of 19th-century Ireland: newspapers, political and literary texts capable of appealing to a modern nation all came out in English. In George D. Boyce's words: "English was the medium through which nationalist Ireland became a political reality" (Boyce 254).

We should ask why Hyde chose the restoration of Irish as a source for constructing a modern Irish consciousness. Because he considered the liberation of Irish culture to be the primary step to the liberation of the Irish nation. He was convinced that Ireland's cultural separation from Anglo-Saxon civilization necessitated a linguistic separation at its core. Thus, in Hyde's version of an Irish nation, regained independence is symbolized by a revived Irish language. Hyde expected Irish to serve as a motor for the cultural elevation of the nation, and cultural elevation to create an inclusive Irish nation.

The Anglo-Irish protestant Douglas Hyde, who knew Irish and felt belonging to the Irish nation, destined the Irish language to integrate a modern cultural nation, which is uniquely Irish but embraces both catholic and protestant social elements. In one interpretation Hyde was an idealist because the restoration of Irish was unrealizable with a largely English-speaking population, and his "Irish Ireland" identity myth failed to prove legitimate for large sections of the Irish people at the dawn of the 20th century. But, seen from another perspective, his concept of Irishness projected the image of a modern civic nation, which embraces internal otherness and shifts emphasis from beliefs in blood, ethnic and religious bonds to the decision of the individual as the basis of national belonging.

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