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Irish Nation but Which Language? Cultural and Linguistic Nationalism in Late Nineteenth-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. But 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 of Britishness, they also feel distanced from a communion with Irishness.

This complicated Protestant identity kit, however, becomes more explicable with insight into Ireland's colonial history. In addition to being politically and economically dependent on Britain, the loss of most of its native traditions and ancient vernacular by the late nineteenth century made Ireland a cultural colony as well. The failure of previous fights for political freedom made a group of primarily protestant intellectuals define and decolonize the Irish nation in a cultural sense, thus aiming to shape an independent Irish identity.

The following study is mainly 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 twentieth century, and explores the linguistic identities that the authors, in their different nation-versions, associate with a culturally sovereign but largely English-speaking Irish population.

Keywords: Ireland, Irish-Gaelic, English, national language, native language, national and linguistic identity, cultural and linguistic nationalism, Protestant

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1. The connection between the transformation of Protestant identity and the emergence of cultural nationalism in late nineteenth-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 is 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 late twentieth century (Pintér 165-66). By contrast, in the late nineteenth century the Irish literary and language revival movement had Anglo-Irish Protestants as its leaders, 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 […]. Nationalists and Unionists, Protestants and Catholics, were equally earnest in their advocacy of the language" (in Nowlan 45).

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

Going a few decades backward, the question arises why Protestants with British roots took the lead in the popularization of cultural and linguistic nationalism in an Ireland of overwhelming Catholic majority. The answer lies in a changing social status of the Protestant population in the nineteenth 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 Irish Anglicans, due to the spreading Darwinian ideas. At the same time, 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 422-23). 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

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424), and the sons of the spiritual-religious leaders of the Anglo-Irish community were now aspiring for the role of the nation's cultural leaders. The three centers of gravitation shaping Protestant attitude to Irish culture in late nineteenth-century Ireland were the Trinity College of Dublin, the Literary Revival Movement and the Gaelic League.

2. Trinity and the cosmopolitans

Since its foundation in the late sixteenth century, Trinity College Dublin had been the bastion of English-Anglican culture. Nevertheless, Henry Grattan, Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet and Thomas Davis, Protestants instrumental in the construction of modern Irish nationalism, all attended Trinity (Rollestone 973). It was also at Trinity that philological research in Irish culture and language gravitated in the late eighteenth century. This tradition was then followed in the nineteenth century by such Protestant figures of the Gaelic Revival as Standish O'Grady and Douglas Hyde, both Trinity graduates. However, certain leading lecturers of the College developed an impatient and arrogantly dismissive attitude towards cultural revival. As Lady Gregory put it, "the Chinese Wall . . . separates Trinity College from Ireland" (in Vance 167).

Although both groups belonged to the Anglo-Irish elite, a clear division has been established between the movement centered around William Butler Yeats and Douglas Hyde, and the circle of Trinity intellectuals, labeling the former as 'national' and the latter as 'cosmopolitan' (Brown, "Cultural Nationalism" 517, Vance 167-168). Whereas both Yeats and Trinity intellectual John 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 (Eglinton, "National Drama" 956).

While investigating an appropriate literary representation of the modern Irish nation, Eglinton distanced himself from anything traditionally Irish. In his *Bards and Saints* (70-74) he describes the Anglo-Irish as "the heirs of a superior culture," and identifies the Irish tongue with the isolated and backward "peasant hinterland," to which he adds, in the tone of the Anglo-Saxon empire builder carrying the white man's burden, 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" ("Bards and Saints" 71-74). 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 feared that the revival of Irish, which was the main objective of Hyde's Gaelic League, would intellectually isolate

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Ireland from Europe, condemning the "Irishman to speak in his national rather than in his human capacity" (Eglinton, "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," Eglinton ("Bards and Saints" 70) 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

By contrast to Trinity cosmopolitans, Yeatsian cultural nationalists advocated a return to Ireland's Gaelic tradition, to the energies of the "source." They suggested 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, see also Yeats, "Literary Movement" 39), and 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 by "shifting the borders of their minds" (Yeats, "Magic" 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 nineteenth and early twentieth 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. Nevertheless, this Irish-English duality required theoretical reconciliation from cultural nationalists who claimed that there was inherent antagonism between Irish and English cultures. In fact, this apparent contradiction was highlighted by Yeats in the following two questions: "Can we not build a national tradition, a national

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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 color, 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, unlike Eglinton, he considered language retention important in the western rural 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" flooded 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 twentieth century Yeats regarded English as a potential *lingua franca* between nations.

From among the varieties of English having evolved in Ireland over eight hundred years of colonial history, Hiberno-English showed the most similarity with Irish-Gaelic. Hiberno-English had been developed by Irish natives since the seventeenth 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 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 173-74). He also stated that Hiberno-English was a new linguistic idiom which "the Irish

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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 162-63).

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

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 nineteenth century (Denvir 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, had been born to English speaking Protestant parents in Western Sligo, but he acquired Irish as a child from peasants in Roscommon County, and in his adult life he became an Irish-language enthusiast. His *The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland* (1892) 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 in order 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.

In order to decolonize Ireland in a cultural and linguistic sense, Hyde and the Gaelic Leaguers advocated a program of restoring "Irish Ireland." 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 . . . 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. (11)

The "Irish Ireland" idea rooted in a reaction to Ireland becoming part of a single, integrated cultural zone of which England was the center, and Ireland, having lost its native tongue and tradition, was reduced to a mere imitation of Victorian England (O'Tuathaigh 56). The program of "Irish Ireland" aimed at liberating Irish thought and mentality from a state of dependence on English culture. Consequently, Hyde blamed the Irish themselves who "apparently hate the

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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 nineteenth century the Irish population had largely become English speaking, and secondly, it held a fairly negative attitude to the ancient tongue. Beyond this, English was the printed medium of nineteenth-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" (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 expects Irish to serve as a motor for the cultural elevation of the nation, and cultural elevation to create an inclusive Irish nation.

Douglas Hyde 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 twentieth century. But, seen from another perspective, his conception 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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