e-Keltoi: Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies

Volume 9 *Book Reviews* Article 3

4-12-2006

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How Celtic Culture Invented Southern Literature. James P. Cantrell. Pelican Publishing Company, 2006. Hardcover, 326 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1-58980-330-5. $29.95.

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Cantrell's book begins with an observation shared by almost anyone who has made the difficult decision to pursue Celtic Studies: the Anglophilic prejudices in American culture have neglected, if not negated, an awareness of the role and contributions of Celtic immigrants in the history of North America. Cantrell echoes many generations of people who deplore "the dearth of knowledge about basic matters of Celtic heritage even among many of the post-graduate educated and the often automatic acceptance of the silliest negative stereotypes of Celtic peoples" (10). Unfortunately, most of the rest of Cantrell's tirade about the American South being the sole reservoir of Celtic culture is erroneous and at times even meanders into the ridiculous, as when he suggests that scholars have ignored "the importance of Celtic immigrants and their descendents to Southern culture" because American élites are prejudiced against "rednecks" (20, 25) . The difficulties encumbering Celtic Studies in the United States are deeply rooted and are quite independent of the American South, despite Cantrell's circular reasoning.

This book is indicative of the Celts' newfound respectability in America and attempts by some writers claiming academic credentials to yoke Celtic identity to the Southern cause.[1] The apparent unwillingness of the American academy to foster the development of Celtic Studies - despite popular interest among students - makes it even more vulnerable for takeover by demagogues and racists. This review essay can only respond briefly to this growing trend, which calls for a book-length treatment. Cantrell complains that scholars who have attacked the groundswell of fanfare for the "Celtic-Southern" hypothesis have done so merely because the idea is dangerous and fractious to national unity. Even if such a motivation could be proven (a questionable proposition), the underlying hypothesis is in fact inherently unsound.

Cantrell spends a lengthy opening chapter on the "Celtic-Southern" thesis expounded by Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, especially in the latter's book *Cracker Culture*. The argument, in summary, is that the culture of the white South was primarily derived from Celtic immigrants and that it was fundamentally distinct from, and oppositional to, the culture of "Anglo-Saxon" England and New England. Despite the fact that the fatal flaws in the book have been pointed out in numerous reviews and essays[2] (some of them countered by Cantrell in this book), the

 ISSN 1540-4889 online
Date Published: April 12, 2006

followers of the "McWhiney-McDonald" myth resist logic and historical reasoning.

It is not always clear whether Cantrell is unaware of the nuanced scholarship carried out in the disciplines that he cavalierly manipulates, or if he purposefully ignores and distorts it. It is not too much to expect for someone who writes a book with "Celtic Culture" in the title, claiming expertise in Celtic Studies, to take account of the debates over the nature of Celticity that occurred during the 1990s. As Joseph Nagy writes in the Introduction to the Celtic Studies Association of North America's Yearbook, entitled *Finding the Celtic*,

> In the wake of recent soul-searching discussions of 'Celticity' in scholarly publications and circles, it is hard to use the terms 'Celtic' and 'Celt' (as in 'The Celtic Studies Association of North America') without feeling self-conscious and perhaps even a bit defensive. Even those of us who recognize and are comfortable with the fundamentally *linguistic* nature of the category 'Celtic' realize that in usage the term often finds itself on a slippery slope, its more responsible users trying to avoid a yawning chasm of unwanted cultural connotations.[3]

Tellingly, Cantrell has not learnt any lessons from the deliberation; on the contrary, he swaggers into the chasm of Celticity and attempts to plant his Confederate Flag firmly in its nebulousness. For Cantrell, like McDonald and McWhiney, the Celts are a society in aspic, unchanged by linguistic, political and religious shifts, internal or external.[4] It is thus not necessary to examine too closely the distinctive characteristics of particular groups or regions and the experiences that formed them.

Cantrell turns all of the inhabitants of Scotland, Ireland, Wales and even the north of England into Celts; only the southeastern corner of England is left to the Anglo-Saxons. Likewise, all peoples, regardless of origin, who enter the American South become Celtic, while those going north of the Mason-Dixon line become Anglo-Saxon. The obvious goal is to turn the Civil War into an ancient blood feud between ethnic peoples with irreconcilable differences rather than a conflict over slavery (54).

Cantrell rightly points out that the tendency in nineteenth-century America to group all white people together as "Anglo-Saxon" has obscured the origins of many distinctive ethnic groups. The Celtic peoples in particular have effectively disappeared (at least in part) because their subservient position in the Anglo-centric United Kingdom was extended into British America. The history and identity of "racially distinct" people were given the chance to develop independently in the twentieth century and have been validated by academic recognition, despite the loss of cultural features. "Certain aspects of West African folk culture did survive, and to label the descendents of the black slaves completely, or even preponderantly, cultural Anglo-Saxon … would be ludicrous, if not simplistically racist" (39).

The real problem with "Anglo-Saxon" and "Celtic" is with the labels themselves - holdovers from the racial imperialism of the nineteenth century - and the essentialist view of culture and identity that they embody. The term "Anglo-Saxon" passed its use-by date in England a millennium ago and it has never had a valid usage in North America. The fact that Cantrell doggedly clings to such fabricated dichotomies is indicative of his racialist fundamentalism.

Labels should always be used with caution but there are classifications much more appropriate that Cantrell should be using, namely "urban" vs. "rural." Even more important are the contemporary identities of the many groups in the British Isles by the time of their immigration to America. Using the term "Celtic" to make broad (and usually inaccurate) generalizations about groups who had different languages, identities and cultures by the time they emigrated to America is misleading and misguided.

In responding to David Gleeson's criticism of McWhiney's inclusion of England's northern and western counties in the Celtic category, Cantrell asserts that, "If he were to execute a comparative study of the basic cultural attitudes and values of Scottish Lowlanders, Scottish Highlanders, Irish Catholics, Ulster Irish Protestants, northern England's border countries folk, and East Anglians, Gleeson would find that the odd man out would be the true Anglo-Saxon" (70). The conflicts between the Celtic groups in the British Isles, Cantrell would have us believe, were simply inter-tribal warfare that cannot negate their essential Celtic unity (75). This interpretation "ignores the varied histories of the so-called Celtic peoples and betrays a lack of familiarity with the work of British and Irish historians."[5] These claims are also unsustainable in the light of contemporary statements from the people themselves. John of Fordun described the emerging Highland-Lowland divide in Scotland c. 1380 as a clash of cultures delineated by languages, a harbinger of several centuries of sustained antagonism not explainable by inter-tribal warfare. Likewise, Gaelic poets in Ireland perceived the settlement of Lowland Scots and others in Ulster not as "business as usual" but as an invasion of foreigners with an alien language and social patterns.[6]

Cantrell's only attempt to define what he means by the oft-used phrase "culturally Celtic" is a summary of features gleaned from *Cracker Culture*: clan structures, heroic ideals, resolution through violence, local (vs. national) consciousness, oral (vs. literate) culture, the centrality of honor, and a pastoral lifestyle (42). These traits, in turn, were derived by McWhiney and McDonald from the observations of outsiders writing about Southern and (selected) Celtic societies (at particular times and places). They are, in other words, élite projections of the "Other." These characteristics cannot be argued on solid ground to describe all Celtic societies or to be exclusively Celtic: in fact, the views of the Gaelic élite about their own peasantry strike the same chord (e.g., the seventeenth-century Irish satire *Pairlement Chloinne Tomáis*). Africans and Native Americans were described by Southerners in these very terms, but this does not make them Celtic. Convinced by racial stereotypes, Cantrell replicates vacuous terms from the fiction surveyed, such as "Celtic temperament" and "Celtic philosophy of life."

The McWhiney-McDonald school would like to represent Celtic societies as antithetical to the structures and values of feudalism. This Norman imposition is assumed to be the origin of many cultural differences between Celtic culture and Anglo-Saxon culture in the British Isles (67-8). In fact, many Celtic groups showed themselves to be adaptive to the evolving social structures of their adversaries: the MacDonald Lordship of the Isles, arguably the last large, independent Celtic principality, made extensive use of "charter lordship" and other feudal constructs, as did many other Gaelic dynasties, including their rivals, the Clan Campbell.[7] Unlike Ireland and Wales, it must be remembered, feudalism entered Scotland by invitation of the ruling monarch and many Celtic leaders adapted successfully to the new system, even if it had unforeseen results for language and identity. Even in Ireland, the Anglo-Norman invasion had profound

consequences for the reordering of Gaelic society: "The new emphasis on lordship and landownership brought the position of the Gaelic Irish chiefs closer to that of their neighbours, the Anglo-Irish barons."[8]

Cantrell quickly glosses over the linguistic definition of "Celtic," dismissing Peter Berresford Ellis's language criterion simply because he is an "activist" striving to maintain the endangered Celtic tongues (35-6). This strategy is crucial for the broad brushstrokes of the McWhiney-McDonald school, but it ignores how contemporary Celts themselves perceived matters. There are numerous texts composed by Celtic speakers expressing the central importance of language in their culture and identity and interpreting the abandonment of their mother tongue by their descendents and erstwhile countrymen as acquiescence to Anglicization.[9] After all, if the Celts were so adverse to change, so independent of spirit, and so isolated in the South, why *did* they lose their Celtic tongues and why did they change their names to sound less Celtic? Cantrell frequently admits the pressures in the South to assimilate to "Anglo-Saxon" norms, including language, but does not recognize the fundamental cultural shifts that occurred along with the adoption of English. Militant Protestantism, fueled by English nationalism, affected radical reorientations of culture and society throughout the British Isles during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but these changes are rejected by the McWhiney-McDonald school of thought.

The title, as well as the author's acceptance of the "Celtic-South hypothesis," would lead us to expect that Cantrell had found content in a corpus of Southern literature which originated in Celtic oral tradition, tangible evidence for cultural continuity: "Not only are a large number of Southern writers of Irish and Scottish ancestry, but Southern literature is primarily predicated on folklore" (80)[10]. Unfortunately, all that he can point to is a number of fictional characters who come to America from Ireland, Scotland or Wales, with some symbolic nod in the direction of their origins. The narrative structures, literary modes and writing styles of these southern authors, of course, have nothing to do with Celtic literature but are firmly based on Anglophone models of literature.

All of the authors discussed by Cantrell were active well after the massive success of Sir Walter Scott, whose influence is clear on many of them. Characters in one novel are avid readers of *Old Mortality* (124). In Andrew Lytle's *The Long Night* (1936), characters surnamed McIvor state that "in the old country across the waters, they had stood up and fought the English who had crossed their borders." Cantrell accepts this as an actual folk memory of this Southern branch of the clan which had been "displaced from its homeland because of successful English aggression" (188-9) whereas it is clear that this is an artistic blurring of elements from Sir Walter Scott's novels: the MacIvors were primarily based in Argyll and Lewis, nowhere near the English border. William Faulkner explicitly embraced a certain version of Scottish heritage, but he had a century and a half of romantic literature from which to draw this formulation.[11]

Cantrell goes to ridiculous lengths to find Celtic origins for the personal names of characters so as to find their hidden Celtic meanings. Tracing "Sutpen" to Welsh *pen* (147) and "Benteen" to Gaelic *beinn* (197) are the two most tortured of these. These exercises are futile, of course, unless both author and audience could parse the linguistic elements of these names, but even Cantrell does not expect them to speak Celtic languages by this time.

Cantrell's desire to shoehorn all of Celtic and Southern history into simple oppositional patterns based on racial essentialism gets him into frequent trouble with historical facts. The ethnocidal acts passed against Highland society are described as "the outlawing of anything that the English deemed indicative of independent Scottish culture: Civilians bearing arms, wearing kilts, plaids or tartans, and owning bagpipes" (295). The hostility was not between Scots and English, but between the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and the Anglophones of both England and Lowland Scotland. Likewise, he claims that the MacGregors were outlawed "for a combination of anti-Campbell, anti-English and anti-Williamite activities," (161) but in fact the clan was forfeited in 1603 by a Scottish King (James VI) well before the reign of William II (1688-1702). Cantrell claims that the ban against African slavery in Georgia in 1739, "was supported generally by the Scottish settlers and 'bitterly opposed' by the 'Anglo-Saxons,' " (286) when in reality it was the Scottish Lowlanders who initiated the move to open slavery in the colony and both the Scottish Highlanders and German colonists who opposed it.[12]

Cantrell quotes Forrest McDonald's conclusion that the "entire history [of the Celts] had prepared them to be Southerners" (149). Cantrell seems unaware that the number of Celtic-speaking peoples in the North and in the West was greater than those in the South by the time of the Civil War. The narrowness of his vision of culture and history in North America is revealed when he grudgingly in an endnote admits to the presence of Celts in Canada: "Small Gaelic-speaking communities continue to exist in Nova Scotia, and Irish Catholics and Protestants and Scots all contributed to Canadian independence, but I doubt that there is a 'Canadian culture', and if so it is too centered on the Anglophone versus Francophone clash to be Celtic in origin" (296).

That he recognizes the existence of a "Southern culture" but not a Canadian one also demonstrates how he picks and chooses his facts. The Anglo-Saxon North vs. Celtic South dualism simply does not hold up when one considers the long-standing history of Celtic-speaking immigrant communities in Canada and the tremendous number of their members who came to the burgeoning economic centers of the North and West of the nineteenth-century United States. Conversely, given his claims of unchanging Celticity, weren't the French immigrants to Canada really just Gauls by another name?

Cantrell supposes that the reluctance of Irish Catholics in the North to join the Union army during the Civil War, and their zeal in supporting the Confederacy, is best explained by an understood parallelism between Yankee imperialism in America and English imperialism in Ireland, and a natural affinity for the "Celtic South" (50-1). In fact, Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* portrays all too graphically the enthusiasm the formerly downtrodden Irish had once they reached America to buy into white privilege and to distance themselves from the lowly station of the African-American. The climax of one of the greatest of Southern literary classics, *Huckleberry Finn*, depicts the moral dilemma faced by the Irish between fighting racial injustice and simply attempting to include themselves in the "white race."[13]

Two of the earliest narratives that Cantrell examines - *The Irish Emigrant, An Historical Tale Founded on Fact* (1817, anonymous) and *The Life of Paddy O'Flarrity* (1834, anonymous) - are claimed by him to assert that "much of what Americans of the Jacksonian era assumed to be English accomplishments on the southwestern frontier are actually Irish" (113). A more plausible interpretation is that these are celebrations of the ability of the Irish to assimilate to Anglophone

norms and thereby become honorary "Anglo-Saxons." As early as 1792, the novel *Modern Chivalry* portrayed how even a "bog-trotting Irishman" could be transformed into an American ambassador to England.[14]

Although Cantrell's title and premise holds that "Celtic culture invented Southern literature," he never tells us exactly what he means by "Southern literature" - it is tacitly assumed to be literature in English by white writers. Just as we need to unpack and disaggregate the term "Celtic" into its composite elements, so do we need to recognize the existence of many different Southern literatures. New work in Southern Studies is allowing us to do just that:

> The promise of this work is to dismantle the monolith of a solid, unified southern United States in order to deal more successfully with microregion, prenational and transnational regions, and diaspora. […] The field is increasingly energized by the effort to reconceptualize memory, history, place, family, kinship, and community in ways that do not reify the shifting subject and subjects of the discourse.[15]

Cantrell attempts to discount issues of race but is at the same time highly jealous of racial rivals. He and his colleagues may be responding, with just cause, to élite America's underappreciation, and even disparagement, of the poor, rural, white inhabitants of the South and their cultural expressions. It is, however, disingenuous to hide behind a Celtic facade and deny the penetration of the institution of slavery into every facet of life throughout the South,[16] shifting the blame to some mythical "Anglo-Norman Cavalier" culture (101). Cantrell seems to subscribe to the notion of "limited good": if the Celts have not received their due share of academic respect it is because it has been stolen by African-Americans, aided and abetted by the American academy's liberal conspiracy. He states not only that poor whites have been victimized worse than African-Americans (24), but that the memory of "wealthy WASPs using black servants to keep Celts down in their place" may be encoded in some texts (259). This is white paranoia and counter-affirmative-action run amuck.

It is certainly correct to state that Celtic-speaking peoples have been an important immigrant group in the United States and that formal institutions of learning have largely ignored their history and culture, but the promotion of Celtic Studies will not be advanced by needlessly attacking the progress made by other minorities, by pretending that assimilation into white privilege did not happen, or by co-opting Celticity for any one region or polemic. The contributions of Celtic peoples to America will only be properly understood if they are treated as individual groups with specific identities and experiences before and after their departure from their homeland, and if the temptation to cast them in the role of proto-Americans can be resisted.

Endnotes

[1] See, for example, Euan Hague, Benito Giordano and Edward H. Sebasta, Whiteness, multiculturalism and nationalist appropriation of Celtic culture: the case of the League of the South and the Lega Nord. *Cultural Geographies* 12 (2005): 151-173.
[2] Most especially, Rowland Berthoff, 1986, Celtic Mist Over the South. *The Journal of Southern History* 52 (1986): 523-550. Michael Newton, 2001, *We're Indians Sure Enough: The Legacy of the Scottish Highlanders in the United States*. Chapel Hill: Saorsa Media.
[3] Joseph Falaky Nagy (ed.), 2002, *Identifying the 'Celtic': CSANA Yearbook 2*, p. 7. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
[4] The Anglo-Saxons are also asserted to survive as a distinctive culture and identity contrasting and clashing with Celts. Transplanted to New England, they become the much-derided Yankees.
[5] Maldwyn A. Jones, 1991, The Scotch-Irish in British America. In Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (eds), *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, pp. 284-313 (at 286). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
[6] Marc Caball, 1998, *Poets and Politics: Reaction and Continuity in Irish Poetry, 1558-1625.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
[7] Steve Boardman, 2003, The Campbells and charter lordship in medieval Argyll. In Steve Boardman and Alasdair Ross (eds) *The Exercise of Power in Medieval Scotland c. 1200-1500*, pp. 95-117. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
[8] Katharine Simms, 1987, *From Kings to Warlords*, p. 20. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
[9] Michael Newton, 'Becoming Cold-hearted like the Gentiles Around Them': Scottish Gaelic in the United States 1872-1912. *eKeltoi Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies* 2 (2003): 63-131, http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/celtic/ekeltoi/volumes/vol2/2_3/newton_2_3.pdf ; Thomas Idhe, 1994, (ed.) *The Irish Language in the United States: An Historical, Sociolinguistic and Applied Linguistic Survey*, Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
[10] See also p. 170.
[11] His vision of Scottish forebears journeying "from Culloden to the Carolinas" ignores the fact that Scottish Gaels began migrating some six years *before* Culloden.
[12] Anthony Parker, 1997, *Scottish Highlanders in Colonial Georgia*, pp. 126-7. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
[13] Noel Ignatiev, 1995, *How the Irish Became White*, pp. 57-9. New York and London: Routledge.
[14] Matthew Frye Jacobson, 1998, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, p. 15. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
[15] Barbara Ladd, 2005, Literary Studies: The Southern United States. *Proceedings of the Modern Language Assocation* 120(5) (2005): 1628-1639 (at 1636).
[16] See William G. Thomas III and Edward L. Ayers, *The Differences Slavery Made* http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR/. n.d.