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*MYTH-MAKING
AND THE CREATION OF IRISH
NATIONALISM IN THE 19TH CENTURY*

PREVIOUS RESEARCH HAS ASSUMED AND IN SOME CASES CRITICIZED THE artificial manufacturing of a Celtic identity by Irish nationalists of the 19th century. While some have attempted to find Irish national origins in the medieval period¹, most scholars recognize that it was in the 19th century that Irish nationalism emerged. This article analyzes the means by which nationalists of the nineteenth century were able to create a modern sense of identity based on their perceived Celtic origins. I will first review and then utilize the scholarly approaches to the study of political myth making to explain the construction of a 'Celtic' Irish identity. This construction of Irish identity differentiated Irish nationalism from earlier conceptions of political identity in Ireland. The Irish began to conceive of themselves not only as a separate Celtic people but as a group whose political aspirations could only be satiated by achieving complete independence from the British crown. By comprehending the

1. Cf. T. FINAN, *A Nation in Medieval Ireland: Perspectives on Gaelic National Identity in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, Archaeopress, 2004.

choices that Irish nationalists made in the 19th century, we can better understand the contemporary nature of Irish nationalism and the implications for Irish identity in the future.

The Study of Political Myths

The study of political myths and the creation of identities can be traced to the work of Henry Tudor, who published a book simply titled *Political Myth* in 1972. Tudor wrote this book in the Cold War context when the study of political ideologies was in vogue. Today, most who write about myth do so in the study of the origins and evolution of nationalism. Tudor's work emphasized that myth is not to be understood as a description of reality but an expression of determination meant to promote a political purpose². According to Tudor, myths survive only because the national audience finds them appealing. The myth resonates with the nation's historical experience. Myths are inevitably about the past, but they also provide prescriptions for the present and the future – of what the ideal is based on inherited truth or story. While myths often have individual heroes, they tell the story of a group and their collective experience and inspire great heroism and self-sacrifice by members of the nation³.

One of Tudor's most important findings that is relevant for the Irish experience is that myths of foundation or formation of a national group tend to be conservative even when the myth comes to justify revolution⁴. Thus, the emergence of a nationalist myth need not foment social revolution if it supports and

2. H. TUDOR, *Political Myth*, New York, Praeger, 1972, pp. 15-16 and 37-38.
3. CÉ. T. GARVIN, *Mythical Thinking in Political Life: Reflections on Nationalism and Social Science*, Dublin, Maunsel & Company, 2001, pp. 12, 20.
4. TUDOR, *Political Myth*, p. 91. O. COQUELIN in *Politics in the Irish Free State: The Legacy of a Conservative Revolution*, «The European Legacy», x, 2005, pp. 29-39, confirms the conservative nature of the Irish political revolution that resulted in independence.

defines the nature of the political revolution in a postcolonial liberation context as in Ireland. In these circumstances, myth makers may denounce extant practices and circumstances because they believe society should be constructed differently, according to their understanding of the prescribed myths of the nation⁵. These do not require a re-ordering of society in terms of class or any other dimension beyond the changes specified by the political goals of the dominant myths of national identity.

Tudor recognized that national myths are not stagnant visions of an ancient past but are continually being reinterpreted and reimagined by each generation as they seek to make the inherited myths meaningful amidst changing social circumstances⁶. The work of Hobsbawm and Ranger support the notion that nationalism is a social construct that only works and becomes viable when it conforms to the experiences and inherited vision of the past of the group that comes to think of itself as a nation⁷. Tradition itself is not inherited without a volitional act by those seeking to choose who they are and what they inherit. While Tudor primarily addresses myth in terms of ideology, he predicts the future study of myth-making when he emphasizes the dramatic form of a myth, how it must explain the experience of those to whom it is addressed⁸. Thus, one can see that those who create myths choose who they want to be and what from their past they selectively choose to remember, commemorate, and memorialize⁹.

5. Cf. TUDOR, *Political Myth*, pp. 128, 131.

6. Ibidem, p. 131.

7. Cf. E. HOBBSAWM - T. RANGER (ed), *The Invention of Tradition*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

8. TUDOR, *Political Myth*, pp. 137-138.

9. Cf. P. CONNERTON, *How Societies Remember*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 21; C. CRUZ, *Identity and Persuasion: How Nations Remember Their Pasts and Make Their Future*, «World Politics», LII, 2000, pp. 275-312; D. KERTZER, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988.

In the last few years there have been a growing number of scholars from a variety of disciplines who have addressed the mythical basis of national identity. This reemphasis on the power of myth in shaping modern nationalism was stressed by Anthony Smith, one of the leading scholars of nationalism, in his book *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. This book, like much of the rest of Smith's work, emphasizes the importance of ethnical nationalism, but the special focus of this book is the importance of the myths of common ancestry in forging modern national identity. While claims of ethnic identity may be important to some nations in terms of their self-identification, most now view these claims of ethnic or racial ancestry as part of the national myth¹⁰.

Most recent works that focus on the role of myth and imagination in the creation of modern nationalism do not focus on the ethnic basis of nationalism like Smith but instead develop their models based on the recent wave of constructivist literature that has come to many fields¹¹. Alexander Motyl, for example, has examined the role of ideas in shaping revolutions, nations, and empires. His work emphasizes that the invention of myth requires transforming extant materials or ideas into something qualitatively different from their earlier form. Thus, myths and the inventions and imaginings of a nation are not

10. A. SMITH, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999. Nevertheless, M. HROCH (in *From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe*, in G. BALAKRISHNAN (ed), *Mapping the Nation*, London, Verso, 1996, p. 79) claims that intellectuals «can 'invent' national communities only if objective preconditions for the formation of a nation already exist».
11. While much of constructivism in International Relations does not focus on the role of myth per se, its emphasis on the role of ideas provides an important backdrop for the study of myth. For examples, see A. WENDT, *Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*, «International Organization», XLVI, 1992, pp. 391-425; J. GOLDSTEIN - R.O. KEOHANE (ed), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993; M. FINNEMORE - K. SIKKINK, *Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Paradigm in International Relations and Comparative Politics*, «Annual Review of Political Science», IV, 2001, pp. 391-416.

created *ex nihilo* but upon the building blocks of human agency and novelty¹². In other words, nationalists create myths by new interpretations or updating inherited traditions and narratives. Motyl argues that the elites who create these national myths need not rely on facts¹³. Like Tudor, Motyl contends that national myths succeed because they resonate with existing stories and understandings. Thus, the interrelated propositions fit together into what Motyl identifies as the 'lifeworld' of the nation. The different belief systems of different nations result in different histories and the ongoing political struggle to define a nation according to a particular national myth¹⁴.

Christopher Flood further develops the concept of political myth and distinguishes it from the concept of sacred myth. Like other contemporary scholars, Flood emphasizes the narrative form of political myths. He presents these myths as political discourses that are a normal feature of political life. Their purpose is to explain the nature of the polity, as it is and how it ought to be¹⁵. Hence, one of the purposes of national myths is to expose those elements of society that do not conform to the values and priorities of those who expound a particular version of the national myth. Traditions are never inherited holistically. Culture and identity are always being debated and redefined based on differing interpretations of the

12. A.J. MOTYL, *Revolutions, Nations, Empires: Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 70. Similarly, R.H. WIEBE argues in *Who Are We: A History of Popular Nationalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 5, that nationalism is culturally created.
13. Cf. MOTYL, *Revolutions, Nations, Empires*, p. 71 ; for a further discussion of the power of myth in creating reality, see T.J. WHITE, *Where Myth and Reality Meet: Irish Nationalism in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, «The European Legacy», iv, 1999, pp. 49-57.
14. MOTYL, *Revolutions, Nations, Empires*, pp. 72-80 ; for a similar conception of the role of myth in structuring the community and creating a reality insulated from external truth see G.M. CUTHBERTSON, *Political Myth and Epic*, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1975, pp. 2-8 and GARVIN, *Mythical Thinking in Political Life*, p. 55.
15. Cf. C.G. FLOOD, *Political Myth: An Introduction*, New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. 11-12.

past, experiences in the present, and hopes for the future. Internal debates and transformations within the nation as well as external challenges to the group's identity thus explain the evolution of national identity and the myths that support them¹⁶.

While much of the study of nationalism has sought to condemn or deny the reality of nationalism in the wake of ethnic and national conflict that has become so prevalent and troublesome around the world, Gregory Jusdanis has developed a defense of nationalism and the nationalist myths upon which modern nations are constructed. Jusdanis describes nationalism as an attempt to interpret and participate in modernity. The rapid pace of social change that has come to traditional societies has required intellectuals to imagine, fabricate, and self-consciously formulate what is lacking in society¹⁷. Nations are needed as people seek to form a measure of social solidarity in the increasingly impersonal, anomic world. National myths, like other myths, provide meaning and order to those living and seeking to understand the world in which they live¹⁸.

Earlier studies such as those of Gellner identify industrialization as triggering the event for the creation of modern nationalisms¹⁹. Gellner and others assume that the modern and industrial world dislocates individuals and groups from their historic community and sense of identity. Those who now participate in a much larger society need to forge some sort of linkage with those they encounter. Nationalism that serves as a necessary human bond in a world where individuals feel much less connected their community in the new modern setting.

16. I. McBRIDE, *Memory and National Identity in Ireland*, in IDEM (ed), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 6.
17. G. JUSDANIS, *The Necessary Nation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 10.
18. Cf. C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Myth and Meaning*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, pp. 11-12.
19. E. GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983.

Ultimately, the desire to live as a group in this new modern setting motivates elites to utilize the emerging national sentiments of the masses to demand and achieve political sovereignty²⁰.

Much of the recent work on understanding the invented or constructed nature of modern nationalism recognizes the purposeful and political nature of crafting national myths²¹. One such scholar is Edward Said who stressed the continuing interaction of the colonizer and the colonized. He saw this as especially important in developing a modern sense of national identity in those areas where imperialism came and was resisted. Said also advocated moving beyond a parochial post-colonial nationalism to a more liberal, pluralist conception of humanistic self-identification²². Lustick has further developed the idea from Said that nations are formed from the process of imperial or hegemonic decline. As the imperial state contracts, it becomes possible for the postcolonial nation to emerge.²³ Hence, decolonization arises from the simultaneous decline of the imperial power and the emergence of a modern nation with compelling myths that can mobilize society to overthrow the dwindling imperial control. Much of the recent work on Ireland builds upon these basic assumptions of imperial decline

20. For the nexus between the arrival of nationalism and the demand for sovereignty, see the work of H. KOHN, *Nationalism, Its Meaning and History*, Princeton, Van Nostrand, 1955. A. BIRCH (in *Nationalism and National Integration*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1989) also emphasizes that nationalism may be based more on a common interest in self-government than a commonality of culture.
21. See for example, B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso, 1991, and HOBBSBAWM - RANGER, *The Invention of Tradition*.
22. E. SAID, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Vintage, 1993. Said's ideas related to the Irish experience were expanded in *Afterward: Reflections on Ireland and Postcolonialism*, in C. CARROLL - P. KING (ed.), *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2003, pp. 177-185.
23. I.S. LUSTICK, *Self-Determination and State Contraction: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank/Gaza*, in W. DANSPECKGRUBER (ed.), *The Self-Determination of Peoples: Community, Nation, and State in an Interdependent World*, Boulder, Lynne Renner, 2002, pp. 201-226.

and the emergence of a Celtic myth that created a modern Irish nation capable of achieving a state²⁴.

From General Theories of the Role of Myth to Myth-Making in the Irish Context

While Said and others interpret the creation of modern nationalism in postcolonial settings, increasing number of scholars are questioning the veracity of the claims of the nationalist myths. Patrick Geary argues that the history of all European peoples is one based on waves of migration. The idea of fixed, separated peoples who lived in isolation of each other forming distinct national identities is a myth itself. In the Irish context, even though the Celts began migrating to Ireland in the sixth century B.C., no one identified themselves as Celtic until the late 18th or early 19th century. Geary, like Simon James and others, is extremely critical of ethnic nationalisms that are inventions of the recent past²⁵. While admitting the power of these nationalist myths, critics of these 'falsely' constructed nationalisms condemn the use of archaeology for nationalist purposes. What these historians and archaeologists apparently do not

24. See W.E. HALL, *Dialogues in the Margins: A Study of the Dublin University Magazine*, Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1999, p. 14; C. MORASH, *Celticism: Between Race and Nation*, in T. FOLEY - S. RYDER (ed), *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1998, pp. 206-213; J.H. MURPHY, *Ireland: A Social, Cultural and Literary History, 1791-1891*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2003, pp. 41-48; SH. MUSTAFA, *Demythologizing Ireland: Revisionism and the Irish Colonial Experience*, in G. HOOPER - C. GRAHAM (ed), *Irish and Postcolonial Writing: History, Theory, Practice*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 66-86; M.G.H. PITTOCK, *Celtic Identity and the British Image*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999, and GARVIN, *Mythical Thinking in Political Life*, p. 14.
25. P.J. GEARY, *The Myths of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002, esp. pp. 16 and 34-37. For a more expansive critique of Irish nationalists' effort to create a Celtic sense of national identity, see S. JAMES, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

comprehend is that nationalist myths do not have to be based on empirical evidence; they only need to make sense based on the perceived history of the nation. As Lévi-Strauss posits, history is the continuing struggle between different mythologies²⁶, and Tom Garvin argues that Irish myths of nationalism are no more powerful or destructive than other nations²⁷. History can thus be understood in the postcolonial context as the effort of nationalists to craft a mythology that mobilizes the masses more effectively than the imperialists' mythology that seeks to justify their continued hold on power. The perceptions of the masses allow for facts to be interpreted or perhaps distorted serving the political aims of the nationalists or the imperialists, whoever is winning or holding power.

A good example of a work that exposes the artificiality or at least the contested nature of Ireland's mythical nationalist heritage is Roy Foster's book, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland*. Foster's work relies on an examination of literary works and historiography rather than archaeology to question the exclusivity of the Celtic myth as the sole basis for Irish national identity. According to Foster, the narrative of Irish nationalism was primarily derived in the era of the Gaelic revival by Sullivan's *The Story of Ireland*, published in 1867 and O'Grady's *History of Ireland: The Heroic Period*, published in 1878. Those who led the Gaelic revival relied especially on O'Grady's work in inventing and creating their nationalist myth. Foster emphasizes that this version of the Irish nationalist myth needs to be contested, and he credits revisionist historians for doing so²⁸.

Despite Foster's attempt to discredit the origins of Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century, recent historical accounts of the arrival of Irish nationalism provide an effective link between the cultural revival and the rise of political nationalism

26. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Myth and Meaning*, p. 43.

27. GARVIN, *Mythical Thinking and Political Life*, p. 1.

28. R.F. FOSTER, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland*, London, Allen Lane, 2001, pp. 6 and 10.

that led to the creation of the Free State²⁹. As Jusdanis contends, the cultural revival in the late 19th century served as a necessary preparation for the Irish to reimagine themselves as an independent nation that deserved a sovereign state³⁰. Moreover, those that participated in the Irish nationalist movement saw it as advocating a cultural nationalism that differentiated the Irish population from the British³¹. The contraction of the British empire and the British preoccupation with World War I provided the political opportunity Irish nationalists sought in establishing a republic. The efforts of twentieth century nationalists could not have come to fruition in the form of the Irish Free State if nineteenth century nationalists had failed to imagine a separate political domain for the Irish. The political ideals explicitly cited by Pearse and others who advocated an Irish Republic built upon the cultural sense of national identity that was forged during the Celtic Revival. This identity was inevitably perceived as anti-British in the colonial context but the inspiration for unity that the long-term British presence on the island had created was a clear sense that being Irish was different from being British. It was only natural that Irish nationalists sought to look to an earlier era for the commonality that would define Irish identity in the 19th century. Thus, political liberation came from culturally derived conceptions of nationhood³².

29. P. MAUME, *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life 1891-1918*, New York, St. Martin's, 1999, R.V. COMERFORD, *Ireland: Inventing the Nation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, and J. LANTERS, *Reading the Irish Future in the Celtic Past: T.W. Rolleston and the Politics of Myth*, in L. McBRIDE (ed), *Reading Irish Histories: Texts, Contexts, and Memory in Modern Ireland*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2003, pp. 178-195.
30. JUSDANIS, *The Necessary Nation*.
31. For a view from this perspective in the early twentieth century, see A. CLERY, *The Idea of a Nation*, Dublin: UCD Press, 2002 [1907].
32. For this perspective cf. D. KIBERD, *From Nationalism to Liberation*, in S.S. SAILER (ed), *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1997, pp. 17-28 and J. HUTCHINSON, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation-State*, Boston, Allen & Unwin, 1987.

Another recent academic trend is the re-emergence of the study of institutions. This neo-institutionalism emphasizes the importance that institutions play in organizing the political, social, and cultural life of a nation and world politics³³. Institutions play a pivotal role in linking the masses with elite constructed national myths. Nationalist ideals cannot be propagated without an institutional framework to disseminate the particular myth of the nation advanced by nationalist elites. One organization that was critical in the cultural realm that organized and symbolized the effort to 'invent' the modern sense of Celtic or Gaelic Irish nationalism in the late nineteenth century was the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Founded in Thurles in 1884, The GAA's stated purpose was to support the playing of Gaelic games at the expense of those that had come from England. The GAA provided an important organizational mechanism for people to consciously support and play the national games. It thus played a contributing role in the effort at creating and defining Irish popular culture in Gaelic terms. Even though these games came to be played and organized based on a Victorian conception of spectator sport, the games came to symbolize to Irish nationalists their own separate history, culture, and identity. They became part of the mythical Gaelic Ireland that told the story of the nation and distinguished the Irish from their British conquerors³⁴.

Ultimately, the narrative that provided the popular belief in the mythical conception of the Irish nation that justified a

33. For this approach see J.G. MARCH - J.P. OLSEN, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics*, New York, Free Press, 1989; R.O. KEOHANE, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984; and G.J. IKENBERRY, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.
34. W.F. MANDLE, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish Nationalist Politics, 1884-1924*, London, Christopher Helm, 1987. For a further analysis of how the GAA contributed to the creation of Irish identity, see M. CRONIN, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity since 1884*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1999 and COMERFORD, *Ireland*, pp. 212-235.

struggle for independence was made in the field of literature. Here in the writings and poetry of William Butler Yeats and other leaders of the Celtic Revival, the Irish came to know and relish their mythical ancestors³⁵. The myth of Cú Chulainn became famous as this mythological Celtic hero symbolized the greatness of the Celtic tradition. The stories of the mythological heroes of ancient Celtic times were seen by those who advocated Irish cultural and political nationalism as a means of inspiring the next generation of Irish nationalists³⁶. The linkage between the heroic sacrifice of these mythical heroes and the martyrs of 1916 led by Pearse himself provided a seamless web of continuity between the Celtic past, Catholicism's emphasis on the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, and the need for a similar sacrifice to achieve political independence.

The cultural efforts to forge a uniquely Gaelic sense of Irish identity at the end of the nineteenth century played an important part in laying the foundation for the political changes that came to Ireland in the twentieth century. Those who led and were involved in the Gaelic revival saw their task as developing a unique sense of national identity, one in sharp contrast to that of the British. Much of the first half of the twentieth century saw many in Ireland attempt to realize the latent political aspirations of those who led the Gaelic revival. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Ireland increasingly moved beyond this parochial post-colonial nationalism as it sought to move beyond policies that sought to recreate an irretrievable past. Instead, the Irish came to embrace modernity and redefine their national identity. Today, the complexity of Irish identity is more apparent as a more layered and hybrid identity

35. On the role of Yeats as a creator of the mythical Irish nation, see A. MARTIN, *W.B. Yeats*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1983, 76-95. For the definitive account of how the Irish literary revival in the late 19th century fostered a mythical view of Ireland, see D. KIBERD, *Inventing Ireland*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996.

36. See, for example, Elaine Sisson's account of Pádraig Pearse's effort to inculcate young boys at his school in E. SISSON, *Pearse's Patriots: St. Enda's and the Cult of Boyhood*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2004.

has emerged that takes into account the rapid social changes that have come to Ireland in recent years. The Irish seek to maintain a link with their mythical past but will not forsake the benefits that have come as they seek to achieve material, not mythical success.

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