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ONE

THE BRITISH ISLES: CELT AND SAXON

VICTOR KIERNAN

High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam
Islanded in Severn stream . . .
The flag of morn in conqueror's state
Enters at the English gate:
The vanquished eve, as night prevails,
Bleeds upon the road to Wales.
A. E. Housman, *The Welsh Marches*

Of the stormy, often bloody history of the British Isles, a great part has consisted of the Germanic occupation of what is now England, followed by a millennium of English penetration into Celtic regions to the west and north, and their assimilation or conquest. Pushed back into hills and backlands, and with a malign social and psychological heritage from times when they themselves were alien conquerors, the Celtic peoples were left with little chance of a healthy evolution. In turn their fate could scarcely fail to have a malign influence on the Germanic mixture which was supplanting them – itself to a great extent composed of 'Celts' forcibly or otherwise transformed. In many ways this can be called the formative experience of the English people, especially of its ruling classes, leaving it as Cobbett said, with its treatment of Ireland in mind, 'arrogant, greedy, fond of power, and of dominion all over the world'.[1] There has been more than one parallel in Europe to this situation of a stronger people learning to be a 'nation' by dominating weaker, more 'backward' ones; the closest is the rise of Austria through subjugation of Slav territories on its mountainous south and south-east, and then of the Slav kingdom of Bohemia. Nationalism in Europe owes to a background of this kind a great deal of its domineering temper; it helped to mould the modern militarist state, ambitious of triumphs such as England sought in the

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Hundred Years' War, and in later times in imperialist expansion outside Europe.

Celtic peoples of today descend from an amalgam formed ages ago of ethnic groups unknown to history and aggressors speaking Celtic languages and wielding iron swords. Today they are cooped up in the north-west fringes of Europe, almost pushed off their narrow ledge into the Atlantic, which millions of their children have been forced to escape across. Yet their Celtic-speaking ancestors once spread across much of Europe, and were warlike enough almost to nip in the bud the Roman Empire destined to bring most of them under its sway. George Borrow, travelling among the Cymry or Welsh of his time, associated their name with Cape Comorin, and concluded that 'The original home of the Cumro was southern Hindustan.'[2] This and many other guesses about Celtic origins gave way to a supposition that the speakers of a first Indo-European or 'Aryan' language had their cradle in the lower reaches of the Volga; that from there some of them migrated across Europe; and that in middle Europe a convergence of many currents of settlement and influence brought about a complex development, and a separating out of Celtic, Slav, Germanic and other linguistic families. A first, Goidelic or Gaelic, pattern of Celtic speech was established in Ireland, perhaps coming partly by way of northern Spain, by the sixth century BC; a later, Brythonic or British, variety was in Britain by the fourth century. Each may, or must, have been carried by advance parties considerably earlier. Lately this picture has in turn been challenged, by the archaeologist Colin Renfrew. He thinks of the original Indo-European tongue spreading across Europe at a very early date, along with farming and the increased density of population this brought with it; subsequent changes were due not to large-scale migrations but to a very gradual separating out of ethnic and linguistic groups from the common stock, taking place in the same areas where they make their first appearance in history.[3]

Pre-Aryan languages, whatever they were, disappeared, apart from Basque and probably a substratum persisting in some of their successors, for instance in the mysterious Pictish of Scotland about which modern enquirers like Scott's Antiquary have argued indefatigably. In historical times it would seem to have been a kind of British, with survivals from the tongue of an older, submerged people.[4] War and conquest were the vocation of the charioteering Celts when they emerged into the dim light of history, with a nobility and its followers at the top of a social structure whose patterns of behaviour they could

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never shake off. Slavery was one component. 'A servile class was an integral part of the Celtic system.'[5] There was too little resistance from a sparse population below to compel petty rulers to unite. Confronted by well-drilled Romans, these crumpled quickly except where protected by nature, as in the Welsh or Scottish hills. Only in Scotland, when Gael and Briton collided, was statehood achieved.

Rome's decline released a new flood of 'folk-wandering', long dammed up by the legions. Saxons and others from beyond the North Sea were ready to pour into Britain. Their colonizing, though they came or soon fell under powerful war-leaders, had more of the character of a 'people's imperialism', with plough instead of chariot for vehicle. In the course of it many Britons perished, many others were pushed westward, to keep up for long a scattered rearguard action whose fabled hero is King Arthur. Probably most stayed where they were, gradually absorbed into the lower orders of the new nation taking shape. Formerly they had drudged for Roman-British land-owners; 'it simply meant a change from one master to another'.[6] Britons and slaves were called by the same Saxon word. It is no wonder that the British ingredient in the population left 'no significant impression on English society'.[7] Only an odd freak of history has left the English with no other collective name for themselves and their Welsh and Scottish neighbours than 'Britons'.

British speech survived in Wales, in the shelter of the hills. It lingered in Dorset and Devon until after 900, in Cornwall much longer. How savage was the Saxon onslaught, however, is shown by a mass emigration from the south-west which gave Brittany its start. Both Wales and Cornwall suffered from Irish as well as Saxon marauders and settlers. Ireland itself was soon being molested by Danes and Northmen. A war-leader from the south, Brian Boru, defeated them in 1014 at Clontarf near Dublin; but Irishmen from the south-western province of Leinster were among his opponents there, and his death on the field ended whatever unity he had forged.

As a nation in the making, Scotland was turning into one of the strangest conglomerates anywhere in Europe, only Spain perhaps displaying a more bizarre hotchpotch. In Argyll from the fifth century AD a Kingdom of Dalriada was being set up by Irish intruders from nearby Antrim in north-eastern Ireland, the Scots. Having to fight to secure a place, and then to keep it in face of enemies who had learned something from long contact with the Romans, they held together better than their Irish forebears. Long-drawn hostilities ended in defeat for the Picts in 839, and a kingdom of 'Alba', or 'Scotland', emerged, with the Pictish tongue fading before the Gaelic of the Scots.

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Gaelic similarly ousted Cumbrian-British when the principality of Strathclyde, stretching down from south-western Scotland through Cumbria to the Welsh border, was taken over by the Scots. But what is now south-east Scotland, including Lothian, had been occupied by the English of Northumbria, and remained English, though with a partially Celtic countryside, even after Danish pressure on northern England at the beginning of the eleventh century enabled the Scots to move in and fix their frontier on the Tweed. They tried indeed, true to old Celtic expansionist instincts, to push it still further south.

Saxon kings aimed at a degree of suzerainty over all of what came to be called in the Middle Ages 'Great Britain', and contests with Welsh and Scots, as well as Danes, promoted 'a massive centralisation of royal power', especially in taxation.[8] The country was being overstrained, class division deepening; only this can explain how in 1066 England, apparently so vigorous, was so easily humbled by a small force of brigands from across the Channel. Its complex machinery of state was ready to be taken over and run by other hands, with a further worsening of conditions for the masses. A precocious trend towards hegemony over the British Isles was now accelerated.

There may have been some poetic justice in the fact that among William the Conqueror's followers were Breton soldiers of fortune, descendants of Cornishmen driven out by Saxons whose descendants they were helping to subdue. His son Rufus captured Carlisle, and with it Cumbria, or Strathclyde south of the Solway: a loss to Scotland of one of its mainly Celtic provinces. 'Marcher' or frontier lords were nibbling at the southern, more vulnerable valleys of Wales. Now and then northern leaders organized efforts at union for defence. Llywelyn the Great (1173–1240) profited by divisions in King John's England. Owen Glendower led the biggest of all later rebellions, which broke out in 1400. He sought support from Scotland and Ireland, with little success. Celtic countries were frequently to receive aid from Continental enemies of the English, scarcely ever from one another.

Celtic society, revolving round the warrior chief, and contemptuous of any utilitarian activity, was everywhere deficient in urban and mercantile talents. To make up for this lack, a continuing inflow of settlers from England and the Low Countries was furnishing Scotland with an 'artisan bourgeoisie' centred on towns in Lothian and northward along the eastern coast.[9] Politically too, its rulers found it easier to borrow from abroad than to build on lines of their own. Malcolm Canmore (d. 1093) had an English wife who brought potent foreign influences wih her. A Celtic or 'nativist' reaction was put

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down. Their son David I (1124–53) had close Norman connections. Anglo-Norman adventurers came in as feudal lords, to bolster the royal power, which in later years their heirs did far more to weaken. Other interlopers made their way into the Highlands, where feudal authority soon intertwined with clan chieftainship. But Scotland's English- and Gaelic-speaking areas were not coming together; the Lowlands were now its nucleus, a smaller equivalent of England with its Celtic penumbra.

In 1286 the old dynasty, now only dilutedly Celtic, came to an end, and Edward I of England seized the opportunity to assert a feudal paramountcy. The long Wars of Independence might be viewed as in one aspect a faction-fight between two sections of an Anglo-Norman aristocracy, some of whose members owned estates in both countries. During the time when Wallace led the resistance a different note was struck, of 'protest by the "poor commons" against their sufferings at the hands of a harsh and repressive society'.[10] This did not recommend him to the nobles, who held aloof. Robert Bruce depended for much of his support on the Gaels, a lesser bugbear in noble eyes than mutinous peasants. At Bannockburn in 1314 'The Scottish army was basically Celtic in composition and largely Gaelic speaking.' Its antagonists numbered Welsh and Irish as well as English archers.[11] But Wallace's name betokens a Welsh background, and Robert's brother Edward was in Ireland for several years before his death in 1318, trying to cement an alliance. To Lowland Scots, Wallace and Bruce were always in later days the grand heroes, round whom much of a slowly growing patriotic legend clung; and the disappearance of formal serfdom – even if it left the masses miserably off – may have owed something to the part played by the commonalty in the defence of the realm.

In Ireland the O'Neills of Ulster, close to their fellow Gaels of the Hebrides, were in the forefront of sporadic resistance to English encroachments; but they boasted 'a chess-set made of the bones of defeated Leinstermen'.[12] Ireland was without any kind of *thinking* class, to digest lessons of experience; there were only the venal bards, ready to sing the praises of anyone who would fee them, and priests ready to welcome Anglo-Norman conquest when it was launched with papal blessings by Henry II. Richard 'Strongbow', Earl of Pembroke in Wales, descended on the coast with mainly Welsh recruits: one of very many instances of England's adroitness in setting Celts, as in later days Asians and Africans, to fight one another for its benefit. In 1170 he captured Waterford and Dublin. Before very long more than half the country was under English sway, but very insecurely except

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in the 'Pale', with Dublin for capital and a parliament of its own. As in the Highlands, and on the Welsh Marches, Anglo-Normans could all too easily fit themselves into Celtic society and turn half-Irish, the more so because their own ethnic background was so indeterminate.

Ireland's destiny was to be totally subjugated; Wales and Scotland were drifting towards a milder, never complete, absorption into England, but the former a century-and-a-half earlier. In 1485 Welsh discontents helped to bring to the throne, as Henry VII, a man with little right to it, but with a Welsh name, whose Tudor successors sought the continuing loyalty of Welshmen by pretending to Arthurian origins. But with Henry VIII Tudor policy came out clearly as one of incorporation, or more thoroughgoing annexation. Two Acts of 1536 provided for counties run on English lines, subject to English law and with English as official language; in return Wales was to have representatives in parliament.[13] Welshmen were to be turned into Englishmen. Bigger landlords were soon anglicized, while lesser ones, poor and rustical except in Glamorgan in the fertile south, and the peasantry, remained Welsh. A partial change came with the Reformation; translations of the Bible in Elizabeth's reign, necessary for the offensive against Catholicism, helped to preserve the language, though also for long to insulate it from modern ideas. Wales was growing into a more orderly land, but it was unmistakably a colony. Mining developed, chiefly to supply English wants. Extensive enclosures of land injured poorer cultivators and forced them off the better soil.

Monarchy had no very deep roots in Wales, but there were Arthur and the Welsh dragon to bolster it; and a poor, retarded region is always apt – like Brittany in Revolutionary France – to be conservative, from an instinctive feeling that any change will be for the worse. (Poverty-stricken old folk in France today vote conservative, Simone de Beauvoir discovered.)[14] In the civil wars Wales was staunchly royalist; altogether, during the seventeenth century the centre of gravity of the waning monarchy was floating westward, into reliance on the Celtic backlands. A 'barbarous squirearchy' led the way into Charles I's camp;[15] Huw Morris, the best poet of the time, aided the royal cause with songs full of loyal zeal 'which ran like wild-fire through Wales'.[16] In all this, national feeling had only a limited place; for one reason because of the north–south divide imposed on Wales – as on Scotland – in all epochs by geography. Glamorgan had more links with Devon and Cornwall, and Irish trade, than with the rest of Wales.[17] Cornwall too stood by the king, thanks to poverty and ignorance more than to any good the monarchy had done it; though

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Cornishmen's chief desire may have been to keep Englishmen out, and they were reluctant to march beyond the Tamar, their river Tweed. Many royalist atrocities after the Parliamentary defeat at Lostwithiel in 1644 were blamed on rustic Cornish auxiliaries.[18]

In later medieval Scotland there was some resurgence of Gaelic life and culture. In the fifteenth century the government managed to overthrow the Lordship of the Isles which had provided the Hebrides with a kind of focal point, but royal authority there was still weak. In the mid-sixteenth century renewed English attacks found the disgruntled Gaels of the west more inclined to make common cause with the invaders than to join in repelling them. In the early seventeenth century nearly half the population of Scotland may still have been Gaelic-speaking, and the language was entering 'its period of greatest vitality'.[19] But clan enmities and feudal ambitions prevented any Celtic political progress. Although in the turmoil of civil wars in the 1640s and 1650s the Highlands played a considerable part, an overture to the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745, there was no Gaelic party; rival caudillos, Argyll and Montrose, set the clansmen at one another's throats.

Reformation had carried Scotland out of the orbit of its old ally France, into that of England, and the throne vacated by the Tudors was inherited by the Stuarts. James VI and I aspired to a closer union between the two countries than a merely personal one; but neither of them was eager to fall in with his wishes. After a generation of rule from London, the National Covenant of 1638, prelude to the civil wars, had a firm ring of Scottish patriotic feeling, as well as firm adherence to Scotland's own Kirk, a church Presbyterian and Calvinistic. The outcome a dozen years later was a faction-ridden country for the first time completely occupied, by a new-model army from England, and annexed. Events of those years suggests that there was no future for Scotland as an independent nation. It was not really even struggling for independence; all of the better-off classes wanted a closer tie with England than the former one, in the interests of Scottish trade and progress, even if they could not agree about the right terms. Good English administration, a uniform 'concern for social justice',[20] failed to soften the xenophobia of the masses, or of the Kirk.

Restoration in 1660 nominally brought back Scotland's autonomy and equality with England. It made little of them, and there was not much objection from those with political weight to the Union of 1707, when the exigencies of the long wars with Louis XIV, and the approaching extinction of the reigning dynasty, led England to insist

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on it. Scotland lost its parliament, never a representative one, but was allowed to keep its College of Justice and legal system, its established Church, and other rights. But while at Edinburgh the parliament was voting itself out of existence, clamorous crowds were filling the streets to denounce the Union.

English settlers in Ireland long continued to 'go native' with a gusto that made them very undependable subjects. There were complaints in the sixteenth century that in Dublin itself everyone talked Irish.[21] Henry VII, for all his claim to Celtic blood, issued stern prohibitions of Irish dress or customs within the Pale, and tightened control over the Dublin parliament. Tudor policy was to make the aristocracy reliable by anglicizing it, but there were many revolts, led by over-mighty subjects whether Irish or Anglo-Norman by origin. All these were put down, it is true. Besides the Celtic inability to combine, there was deep class division, going back to the Celtic dawn. Highland chiefs could be sure of the fidelity of their underlings, by fostering a clan spirit among them; Irish lords evidently could not, and very often they preferred, in the north especially, to make use of mercenaries, always forthcoming from the Hebrides. Ireland was one of the first countries where conquest was proclaimed liberation – a formula adopted by all modern imperialism. An Irish writer of our day thinks of the pretext as not altogether unrealistic, and of the invaders as having an easy task in weaning the poorer natives away from their masters.[22]

In 1603 the biggest rising, led by the O'Neill Earl of Tyrone, ended in defeat, leaving the way open for the Ulster Plantation. Gaels of Ireland and Scotland were finally pushed apart by this immigrant settlement. Many settlers on the vast confiscated estates were Scots, whose progenitors if not themselves had been Gaels; but religion was a breach never to be closed. Religion could on the other hand do much to bring together the 'Old English' settlers, many of whom were faithful to Catholicism, and Irish malcontents. After the Earl of Strafford as Charles I's governor had estranged all sections of feeling in Ireland, these two communities joined in the rebellion that broke out in 1641–2. For the first time there was something like a national movement. But unity proved fragile; there were factional jealousies, and, as always, too wide a gap between high and low. No full mobilizing of the people could be contemplated.[23] When Cromwell appeared on the scene defeat was inevitable. With the 1688 Revolution, Catholics could take up arms again, this time in the Stuart cause like Wales in the 1640s. In 1690 their hopes were extinguished by the

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victory of William of Orange, invited from Holland to England to reign as William III, at the battle of the Boyne.

Ireland was reduced to a colony,[24] exploited directly through extraction of wealth, indirectly through checks on production that might compete with English interests. Nevertheless, as the eighteenth century went on there was a glow of mild prosperity for the propertied classes, among them some Catholics who changed religion in order to keep their estates or enter the professions. Anti-English feeling ran mostly underground, in varied forms of peasant agitation – by Rightboys, Whiteboys, and others – against rack-renting by alien or half-alien landlords and tithes extorted by their Church. In time the parliament at Dublin learned to strike some patriotic attitudes, though it represented scarcely anything more than the landowners, completely dependent on English backing. Kohn has emphasized the freakish jumble of ideas that went into the opening phase of modern Irish nationalism.[25] It was put to the test in the 1790s, after first the American and then the French Revolution had stirred a whirlpool of political and social feeling. What was revealed was not the strength of a nation, but deadly hatred between the classes and the masses.

In 1791 – just a century-and-a-half after the united front against Charles I – the 'United Irishmen' began their brief career. Their centre was Belfast, where a Presbyterian trading class was ready to join hands with middle-class Catholics against the Anglican ('Church of Ireland') landlords and their British affiliates. But soon a rural, Catholic, secret organization of 'Defenders' was demanding much more sweeping changes. In 1795 the Orange Order was set up, with a name borrowed from the Protestant hero William of Orange, to turn the Presbyterian rank and file in Ulster against their Catholic neighbours. In 1797 government and propertied classes joined in a 'pacification' of the north, followed next year by a still more brutal one in the south, where agrarian revolt was breaking out.

It was easy now for the prime minister Pitt and his Tory Party to lay plans for the Union effected in 1800, by methods more squalid than the Union with Scotland in 1707, but with similar motives of wartime security against France. The Irish parliament could not be a serious obstacle. Its elimination, by stripping away a political sham, at least opened the door to a broader-based national movement. Daniel O'Connell, 'the Liberator', began campaigning for repeal of the Union not long after its birth, and at the same time for removal of the legal disabilities weighing on Catholics. He inaugurated a populist

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strategy of mobilizing mass support, with monster meetings and fiery oratory, which was only later emulated in Britain. Catholic Emancipation was granted in 1829, to conciliate the commercial and professional groups whom alone it benefited. Repeal was obstinately refused, and in the 1840s O'Connell was being left behind by the impatient leaders of Young Ireland, who in 1848 swelled the European chorus of revolution with a very small token rising of their own.

Nationalism like theirs 'developed almost wholly as a mystique', an ideology of a small middle-class or petty bourgeois elite, much of it only a generation or two removed from the soil, but in haste to forget the real hardships of those who cultivated it.[26] Instead they appealed to the potato-eaters in a romantic emotional style, akin to that of Mazzinians or Polish insurrectionists. Some of the rack-renting landlords were Irish, many middle-class men with money aspired (with better fortune after the great famine of 1840s) to become landlords. Orators therefore had to shut their eyes to social realities; they were then disappointed when the multitudes who applauded their rhetoric declined to rally round at the signal for action. From the time of Wolfe Tone at the end of the eighteenth century, failure left them, as O'Faolain says, full of indignation at the passivity and stupidity of the people.[27]

Union had been advertised as a guarantee of prosperity for Ireland. A vivid summary of the result was compiled in 1834 by William Cobbett, the radical champion of England's rural poor, who died before completing the book he meant to write. He saw clearly the *colonial relationship* between England and Ireland, and was convinced that things had got much worse for most people since the Union, if only because this was bound to increase landlord absenteeism; also Ireland was heavily under-represented in the London parliament, he pointed out in a lecture in Fishamble Street, Dublin, in November 1834, advocating repeal.[28] Decay of handicrafts was of course taking place in England too, but Ireland had little modern industry to replace them. At Limerick he was welcomed by a crowd of thirty thousand; in one street there, he says, 'I saw more misery than any man could have believed existed in the whole world.'[29]

In the countryside, the further west the more Celtic, and more wretched. An old villager in Donegal, born in 1864, recalled that in his boyhood all the folk were on a more or less equal footing, except the landlords. 'They were on the top of the world.'[30] Even their bailiffs could play the despot; 'if you met a bailiff and didn't touch your cap, you'd find yourself out of your farm or maybe in jail'. They got the best shares when community holdings surviving from the Celtic past

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