

## Celticity in the Old South

BY MICHAEL NEWTON

*Thistle & Shamrock* is one of the best-loved syndicated radio programs in the US. Having expanded from its original base in Charlotte, North Carolina, to over 350 radio stations all over the United States, *Thistle & Shamrock* broadcasts weekly music popularly understood to be "Celtic," from Irish fiddle tunes, to Scottish bagpipe music, to traditional ballads. That program's appealing vision of Celticity is both traditional and contemporary, rooted in old Europe but extending into North America and beyond. This unifying musical theme of Celticity, with many regional variations, plays very well with an audience that is searching for "authentic" folk culture, both exotic and familiar.

The rise of interest in "Celtic music" parallels a recent trend among many white Americans who identify themselves as Celtic. Today, Celtic festivals and "Highland Games" are held across the nation on nearly every weekend of the year, with local Irish pubs and Celtic heritage organizations scattered widely in major cities. Perhaps nowhere else in the United States is the allure of Celtic heritage more tempting, and more potentially dangerous, than in the South.

Upon its publication in 1988, the flawed but influential book *Cracker Culture* by Grady McWhiney called for the reclamation of the lost Celtic heritage of the American South: "What is most remarkable about the Old South's predominant culture, which I call Cracker culture, is how closely it resembled traditional Celtic culture," wrote McWhiney.<sup>1</sup> Although the

unsound premises of the “Celtic South” hypothesis have been exposed in academic journals,<sup>2</sup> echoes of its assertions of Southern Celticity, sometimes amplified and accentuated, have since made their way into popular rhetoric. James Webb’s popular 2004 book *Born Fighting* claims of Appalachia, “Mountain culture was Celtic culture.”<sup>3</sup>

Most of this ethnic reinvention is relatively harmless, but some of those grasping at the Celtic label clearly have a racist agenda: by making an erroneous equation between Celticity and whiteness, such people are attempting to root their ethnic origin myth in a culture that has recently seen a boom of public approval. The website of the League of the South, for example, alleges that the Anglo-Celtic foundations of the South have come under pressure from less deserving ethnic rivals:

The League of the South champions without apology the traditional core Southern culture that has defined the national character of Dixie for generations. That dominant culture was historically handed down to us by the Anglo-Celtic peoples of the British Isles who settled the South and formed its original political community. Over the centuries, our culture has been enriched in subtle ways by the influences of other non-dominant, cultural groups, particularly by black Southerners and the French-speaking Cajuns of Louisiana, but at its essence [sic], the South has always remained a predominantly Anglo-Celtic civilisation.

Unfortunately, in these politically-correct times, open season has been declared on Anglo-Celtic Southern culture while, iron-

<sup>2</sup> Particularly Rowland Berthoff, “Celtic Mist over the South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 52/4 (November 1986): 523–50.

<sup>3</sup> James Webb, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004) 168.

ically, other minority ethnic subcultures of the South are universally celebrated and advanced as a matter of public policy. The League stands at odds with an elitist zeitgeist that coldly seeks to condemn the traditional South to a sentence of cultural genocide.<sup>4</sup>

The term "Celtic" is useful to modern scholars in identifying a language family and a broad set of shared cultural features traceable in the literature and law of Celtic-speaking peoples, but the term "Anglo-Celtic" is an oxymoron. Any trained researcher would no doubt be baffled as to the definition of a supposed "Anglo-Celtic civilization." Researchers might also wonder why African contributions to the South—such as the banjo or gumbo—do not qualify as elements of the "traditional core Southern culture."

It is not surprising that, in recent years, scholars have reappraised the term "Celtic." Until very recently, it was a label applied by outsiders (Greeks, Romans, Classicists, English, etc.) in reference to various peoples who did not necessarily think that they had anything particularly significant in common with one another. There is no evidence that the early Celtic-speaking immigrant communities in America identified themselves collectively as Celts. The uses and misuses of this ethnonym at present are so vexing that Celto-skeptics have suggested banning the term altogether.<sup>5</sup>

Granted the numerous problems of definition and continuity within the modern reinterpretations of Celticity in the US, the Old South (along with the rest of mainstream America) adamantly rejected any identification with the Celts. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was little dispute that race was a biological reality that historically formed the basis of a wide range of personal experience, including politics, art, and personal character. What was open for debate was exactly how to define and

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.leagueofthesouth.org>, accessed June 2005. The website has since been revised, however, and this text is no longer available.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth and Vincent Megaw, "Celtic Connections Past and Present: Celtic Ethnicity Ancient and Modern," in *Celtic Connections: Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Celtic Studies*, ed. Ronald Black, William Gillies, and Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999).

identify specific races and how to employ race in the interpretation of history. Regardless of specific classification schemes or historiographic renderings, in American discourse the apex of the grand "race" narrative was reserved for the Anglo-Saxon.

Exactly how the Celt fit into these narratives of race was less clear: social and political contexts certainly influenced the depiction of Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Breton, Manx, and Cornish peoples (when American writers bothered to mention them at all). Whether texts silently elided the presence of Celts in the New World or allowed for their assimilation into the variously named British, European, Caucasian, or white race, there is ample evidence for continued prejudice against Celtic peoples. White Southerners, no less than other white Americans, preferred to think of themselves as Anglo-Saxons and Southern texts continued to reflect the anti-Celtic biases across the United States through at least the mid-twentieth century.

If history offered any lesson to Americans about race, it was that civilization required constant vigilance among elite groups lest the general population bring about their downfall. Narratives centered on the Roman Empire or the Anglo-Saxons became popular parables about progress, and in many such narratives it was the Celt who played the adversary. According to such a notion, the Celt had to be repressed, just as the African and Native American had to be repressed, for the good of civilization. America's shining beacon of Anglo-Saxon liberty could fulfill its racial responsibility by repeating the historical patterns of conquest and colonization. In an 1855 history text, for instance, Thomas Thorpe wrote:

The heading of this chapter intimates that the Anglo-Saxon is the only race capable of sustaining freedom. We base that opinion on the facts we have adduced, and on the additional one, that America is the only country in the world that has sustained institutions perfectly free.

The history of the Anglo-Saxon race affords abundant material for the reflective mind. It exhibits in an unusual degree the



fact that the national characteristics of a race do not change. [...] But the truth is, the Anglo-Saxons never settled among the Celtæ—as the Franks among the Gauls—but drove them out, and receiving continued accessions of their countrymen from the shores of the Baltic and adjacent islands, repeopled the conquered territory.<sup>6</sup>

Such a position held that the rationality and masculinity of Anglo-Saxons made them fit for governance, while the Celts were marginalized due to their supposed emotionality and femininity. The entry about the Celts in the *Cyclopædia of Political Science, Political Economy, and the Political History of the United States* (1899) reflects a belief in the irrational Celt:

The Celtic race, which formerly occupied all of Gaul and Great Britain, and a great part of the territories of Belgium and Helvetia, can not now be found anywhere in a pure state except in Armorica, or French Brittany, in Wales, in Scotland, particularly in the Highlands, in the Shetland and Hebrides islands, and finally, in Ireland. The domain of this valiant, imaginative, sensitive and adventurous race, once so extensive, is now reduced to this mere remnant of territory. The Celts are the most interesting and unfortunate of all the barbaric races. Their conquerors, exasperated by their stubborn resistance, never spared them, but always pitilessly tracked them, and exterminated them without mercy. This race owes its cruel destiny in part to its very qualities: its extreme sensitiveness often turned into harmful rage, imprudent, hasty hatred, and capricious sallies of contempt, while it on the other hand, easily engendered despair, discouragement and silent melancholy. This sensibility explains why the

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Thorpe, *A voice to America; or, The model republic, its glory, or its fall* (New York: Edward Walker, 1855) 89–90.

Celts have never been able, despite their valor, to preserve their independence, and why, after having lost it, they have never been able to cause their masters to bid them welcome, or to make their subjection the starting point of a new destiny. Conquered races have been known to govern their conquerors, like the Greeks, or to use the masters which fate had given them, like the Italians generally; but the Celts have never been capable of such miracles. The Celt does not know how to control his emotions.<sup>7</sup>

That such an interpretation of history was also incorporated into the debates about the extent to which African Americans should be granted political and social concessions is clear in various nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, such as the 1901 book *The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, and What He May Become: A Critical and Practical Discussion*, which makes an explicit parallel between Africans and Celts: "What are the negro's qualifications for such leadership as a movement of this sort implies? It is an observed fact that negro and Celtic leadership is susceptible to the weakness of ungovernable desire; that both acknowledge but slight amenability to wholesome restraint; and that, in the case of each, inconsiderate zeal has wrought irreparable injury to the race which it represents."<sup>8</sup>

The alleged similarities between the two races in terms of mental propensities reflected that era's positioning of races on the evolutionary ladder. For some scholars, such as Samuel George Morton in an 1854 article, the distance between Anglo-Saxon and Celt was greater than that between Celt and African: "This affinity, however, is not so close between all races—the blacks and whites, for example—as to enable them to amalgamate perfectly. Dr. Nott maintains that mulattoes partake, to some extent, of the nature of hybrids, especially when one of the parents is an Anglo-Saxon, that race being further removed in its affinities from the negro, than the Celtic or Iberian stock."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John Lalor, ed., *Cyclopædia of Political Science, Political Economy, and the Political History of the United States by the Best American and European Writers* (New York: Maynard, Merrill, and Co., 1899) section 3.116.18.

<sup>8</sup> William Hannibal Thomas, *The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, and What He May Become: A Critical and Practical Discussion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901) 336.

Political and social privilege was seen as the natural result of inherent racial qualifications. The dominance of the Anglo-Saxon within the American social hierarchy was the result of a "natural selection" of nations that endowed him with superior faculties. This is evident, for example, in the 1905 booklet *Natural Selection and the Race Problem*, which was reprinted from the *Charlotte Medical Journal* of Charlotte, North Carolina:

With the many barriers to development which nature had placed in the way the Anglo-Saxons contended successfully. Of their struggles with other races I will quote from Major Robert Bingham:

"They touched the Celt, and in a hundred years there were no Celts except in the mountains of Wales and in the mountains of Scotland. The Norman touched them, and the Norman was absorbed and his identity disappeared. They came in contact with the Red man in America; and, as the Celt vanished away at the touch of the barbarian Angles and Saxons, so the Red man vanished away at the touch of their descendants, the civilized Anglo-Americans. This same man touched the Frenchman from the mouth of the St. Lawrence to the mouth of the Mississippi, and the Frenchman's power in that vast region is with last year's snow, and what was once French America is now the heart of Anglo-American civilization and power. The yellow man touched the Anglo-American and has been excluded more by the unwritten written law of race hostility and race antagonism than by any formal acts of Congress. And the Anglo-American has just touched

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel George Morton, "On the Unity of the Human Race," *The Southern Quarterly Review* 10/20 (October 1854) 292.

the Spaniard and the Spaniard has vanished from this hemisphere."<sup>10</sup>

White privilege in America was secured with hard-line racial solidarity in the name of, and under the auspices of, the Anglo-Saxon, despite the plurality of ethnic origins behind the biological facade. Neglect toward the other cultural influences upon American culture can be seen, for example, in the Cape Fear Valley of North Carolina, which in the eighteenth century was the largest settlement of Scottish Gaels outside of Scotland. Pockets of Gaelic survived in the Cape Fear Valley into the late nineteenth century, and descendents of these Gaelic-speaking immigrants came to hold prominent positions in state government and social life. Nonetheless, the 1898 manifesto of the People's Party of North Carolina declared: "Neither this State nor any other State will ever be governed and controlled by any but the Anglo-Saxon race as long as that race shall dwell in it. Powers, both moral and physical, sustain the statement. The moral power is the innate consciousness of superiority on the part of the Anglo-Saxon, which will forever keep him in the ascendancy and a recognition by all other races of that superiority."<sup>11</sup>

The Scotch-Irish, the subject of much ethnic hagiography in the nineteenth century, were of greater numerical significance in the United States than the Scottish Highlanders. The manner in which texts about the Scotch-Irish deal with the relationships between Celtic peoples and Anglophones is an indication of racial stereotypes and attitudes. Most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers dealing with Scotch-Irish settlement in America went to great lengths to disclaim any taint of Celtic blood in that population:

Now, who were, and who are the Scotch-Irish? The common notion is that they are a mongrel breed, partly Scotch and partly Irish; that is, the progeny of a cross between the ancient Scot and

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin K. Hays, *Natural Selection and the Race Problem* (Charlotte: The Charlotte Medical Journal, 1905) 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> *People's Party Hand-Book of Facts. Campaign of 1898. State Executive Committee of the People's Party of North Carolina* (Raleigh: Capital Printing Company, Printers and Binders, 1898) 10.

the ancient Celt or Kelt. This is an entire mistake. Whatever blood may be in the veins of the genuine Scotch-Irishman, one thing is certain, and that is that there is not mingled with it one drop of the blood of the old Irish or Kelt. From time immemorial these two races have been hostile, and much of the time bitterly so.<sup>12</sup>

Such unambiguous hostility to Celtic identity in the past is ironic given the lengths to which many current authors (such as James Webb) go in order to bring the Scotch-Irish into the “Celtic” fold.

Various changes in popular perceptions during the final decades of the twentieth century have caused “Anglo-Saxon” to be displaced by “Celtic” as the ethnonym of choice among many white Americans. Contributing factors include the Nazi tarnishing of the “Germanic idea” and the consolidation of the Celts into the Caucasian category in American society. Before such shifts occurred, however, old England was the primary target of Americans’ atavistic yearnings.

European emigrants brought their vibrant folk cultures to America before industrialization and the homogenizing effects of the nation-state caused the virtual extinction of those folk cultures in the Old World. By the early twentieth century, folklorists became aware that rural America, and the South in particular, retained what had long since withered in Western Europe, but in no respect was this inheritance seen as something particularly “Celtic.” Indeed, Cecil Sharp—an English folklorist who was also an early collector of Old World ballads in the New World—wrote in his diary of August 13, 1916, while collecting material in the mountains around Asheville, North Carolina, of how very English his subjects were:

My experiences have been very wonderful so far as the people and their music is concerned. The people are just English of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. They speak English,

<sup>12</sup> John Dinsmore, *The Scotch-Irish in America* (Chicago: Winona Publishing Company, 1906) 7–8.



look English, and their manners are old-fashioned English. Heaps of words and expressions they use habitually in ordinary conversation are obsolete, and have been in England a long time. [...] They own their own land, and have done so for three or four generations, so that there is none of the servility which, unhappily, is one of the characteristics of the English peasant. With that praise, I should say that they are just exactly what the English peasant was one hundred or more years ago. They have been so isolated and protected from outside influence that their own music and song have not only been uncorrupted, but also uninfluenced by art music in any way.<sup>13</sup>

While English researchers looked to backwoods sections of the United States for the survival of their vanished traditions, Americans saw themselves as equal partners in Anglo-Saxon self-realization. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Manifest Destiny supposedly demonstrated the inherent superiority of the Anglo-Saxon on American soil, while the British Empire claimed possession of vast territories upon which the sun never set. It is little wonder, then, that many Americans would want to identify with the racial classification so clearly on the ascendancy. Indeed, as *Cracker Culture* suggests, "Standard histories of the South give no indication that Celts were important in the region."<sup>14</sup>

The American identification with Anglo-Saxon civilization must have discouraged the survival of linguistic and cultural features within immigrant communities that were recognizably Celtic. Native Scots traveling in the US remarked that the immigrant community of the Cape Fear became effectively assimilated by their Anglophone neighbors. Rev. David MacRae visited that area just after the American Civil War and recorded with surprise that "Highland songs and dances were once common; but 'Dixie's Land' is better known now than the pibroch."<sup>15</sup> The Reverend John C.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Michael Yates, "Cecil Sharp in America: Collecting in the Appalachians," *Musical Traditions* <http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/sharp.htm>, accessed July 2005.

<sup>14</sup> McWhiney, *Cracker Culture*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> David MacRae, *The Americans at Home* (New York: Dutton, 1952) 254.

Sinclair, a Gaelic-speaking minister in the Cape Fear, announced as early as 1872: "The old race is gone and their descendents have given up, in a great degree, the customs and manners of the old Gaels. The ancient Celtic language is nearly dead, except with the few families who arrived within the last thirty years."<sup>16</sup>

Identity is a dynamic phenomenon that often has more to do with perception than with the actual constituent cultural elements. A culture might mask or deny influences from outside sources, an attitude that mainstream American society has long taken regarding African- and Native-American cultural influences. It is an uncontestable fact that settlements of Celtic-speakers did exist in the South, even if they were minorities. Still, persistent Celtic elements in Southern culture cannot be taken for granted or assumed to be self-evident. Making any realistic appraisal will require a much more concerted and critical approach than has been attempted to date, requiring the efforts of scholars specializing in the distinctive cultures of the several Celtic groups that settled in the South.

Despite numerous calls for its development, the field of Celtic Studies has been largely neglected in American academia, especially in the analysis of American culture and history. Some critics of such an endeavor might think that that field would only extend white privilege in higher education, but that would be to misunderstand the critical tools that academia could provide in breaking down racial myths being exploited by racist groups. In the vacuum of intellectual leadership and the lack of an educated public, Celtic identity has been appropriated for purposes that contradict the facts of history. Most people of color in America, in fact, have as much right to claim and celebrate Celtic heritage as "white" people do. The longer that misrepresentations of Celticity are ignored and unchallenged by those best equipped to deconstruct them, the more entrenched those misrepresentations may become in the rhetoric of racial polarization and hatred.

<sup>16</sup> Rev. John C. Sinclair, letter to the editor, *An Gàidheal* 1 (June 1872): 97.