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Introduction

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Introduction

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In their seminal 1961 text *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*, Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees are able to speak confidently of ‘The Tradition’, a *single* Celtic tradition which encompasses the ancient mythology, religion, and storytelling of ancient Wales and Ireland. Deploying the methods of comparative religion, anthropology, and literature, the Welsh authors show convincingly, through detailed and sensitive thematic readings and interpretations, that Ireland and Wales were intimately linked through innumerable shared cultural, religious, historical and social connections. *Celtic Heritage* can be taken as typical of the scholarly view that during one long period of their early history Ireland and Wales were in a sense united in a shared culture, thanks to their Celtic identity. This view, so brilliantly adumbrated in their book, informs the very structure of the academic study of early Wales and Ireland, in that the mythological, literary, and historical materials of the tradition are almost invariably studied side by side in Departments of Celtic Studies. Though such departments also include study of the languages and literatures of the other territories and nations designated as ‘Celtic’ – Brittany, Cornwall, and Gaelic Scotland – Wales and Ireland are frequently seen as having a particularly close ‘special relationship’. The description of the current Master’s degree in Celtic Studies at Oxford University, for example, speaks of ‘the traditional basis of Celtic Studies’ as being ‘the comparative study of medieval Irish and Welsh language and literature’.¹

But what of Irish–Welsh connections in the modern period? While an assumption that Ireland and Wales can, and indeed should, be studied comparatively is commonplace for Departments of Celtic Studies focusing on the early history and culture of the two countries, it is by no means common for such a comparative perspective to be brought to bear on the two countries in the period after 1600. Distinct religious histories post-Reformation alongside widely differing experiences of industrialisation in the nineteenth century created a cleavage in the Irish and Welsh configurations of modernity. Referring to this history, Cecile O’Rahilly, in her *Ireland and Wales: Their Historical and Literary Relations*, a prize-winning essay at the Barry National Eisteddfod in 1920, comments that ‘For many reasons . . . there had long been scant sympathy between the Irish and the Welsh people.’² And yet the perception that Wales and Ireland still share a ‘special relationship’ is widespread. Evidence to support such a perception can be gleaned from a wide spectrum of contemporary phenomena, from ongoing political and economic collaboration between the two countries in EU structural funding projects, to ‘Celtic’ film

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and literature festivals, and onto the undeniable *frisson* both on and off the pitch when Wales and Ireland play each other at rugby.

In order to test such untheorised perceptions about Ireland and Wales, in 2006 an interdisciplinary research seminar series was established at Cardiff University, to which scholars were invited to present papers exploring the possibilities of Irish–Welsh comparisons. All of the essays included in this Welsh special issue of *Irish Studies Review* had their origins in papers given in Cardiff. Subsequently, building on the success of the seminars, the Ireland–Wales research network was established by us and our colleague, the historian Paul O’Leary at Aberystwyth University, with funding from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council.

One of the key questions emerging from these ongoing debates concerns nomenclature: the term ‘Celtic’, used in the preceding paragraphs, is marked by contestation and confusion. Recent archaeological research has called into question its applicability as an ethnic category, while its pervasive use in the discourses of tourism and marketing has discredited ‘Celtic’ as an intellectual category. If the project, though, is not just to describe but to conceptualise Irish–Welsh relationships, what are the usable terms? A number of possible terms have come to the fore in recent debates, such as ‘four nations’, ‘archipelagic’, ‘post-colonial’, and ‘post-national’. The contemporary critical interest in the ‘transnational’ may indicate the direction of future conceptualisations of the forms of connectedness. As editors, we have not sought to impose a single terminology but have instead been interested in seeing how the various writers represented here have worked from a particular case or disciplinary perspective towards innovative comparative critical frameworks. Scholars here look explicitly and probingly at modern Wales and Ireland and in the process begin to define a new, interdisciplinary field of enquiry. It is doubtful whether we can, with a confidence analogous to that of Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, entitle this special issue ‘Celtic Heritage: *Modern Tradition in Ireland and Wales*’, but we believe that these essays do point to some intriguing shared cultures, experiences, and practices.

In the essays that follow, the authors take up interestingly different positions regarding the relationship between Wales and Ireland. These differences can be tracked along a number of axes; chiefly those relating to national cultures, disciplinary assumptions, and historical periods. Paul O’Leary’s opening essay ‘Public Intellectuals, Language Revival and Cultural Nationalism in Ireland and Wales: A Comparison of Douglas Hyde and Saunders Lewis’ interrogates the bases of historical comparison between Ireland and Wales. At the same time, it offers a specific case study demonstrating the interplay between similarity and difference in comparative research. By analysing two lectures which are similar in many ways – both being decisive and shaping public utterances on the question of language – and yet which differ in important respects – notably in their chronological disparity and their reliance on different technologies – O’Leary draws out ‘the different trajectories of the two cultural nationalisms’ and ‘decentres the seductive – but simplistic – Ireland/England and Wales/England oppositions that continue to dominate large parts of the historiography about cultural nationalism’.

Where O’Leary ends on a note of difference, Katie Gramich’s essay ‘Creating and Destroying “The Man Who Does Not Exist”: The Peasantry and Modernity in Welsh and Irish Writing’ traces the trajectory of a shared trope – the figure of the idealised peasant in Welsh and Irish literature from the early nineteenth century to the present. The essay shows how the ‘emblematic figure’ of the peasant is diagnosed as dead or passing and yet continually and stubbornly reasserts its existence, metamorphosing into new forms to meet new cultural demands. What this essay shares with O’Leary’s is a dissatisfaction with dominant conceptual modes, particularly in relation to modernism, too often viewed

as a metropolitan phenomenon separated from both the nineteenth century and the rural hinterland on which it borders.

The territory explored in Darryl Jones's essay 'Borderlands: Spiritualism and the Occult in *fin-de-siècle* and Edwardian Welsh and Irish Horror' expands the idea of the borderland to include the space in between reason and the occult or the rational and the spiritual, so often and problematically associated with Ireland and Wales. The essay shows how 'Celticism enabled writers to slip easily across the border between these two worlds, the occult universe and the political nation'. His analysis of a series of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary and cinematic texts maps a relationship between Wales and Ireland onto the borderland between the natural and supernatural worlds. Moreover, this essay is a salutary reminder of the way in which both Wales and Ireland could be – and to an extent still are – viewed through a distorting lens which not only rendered them as picturesque but might also depict their inhabitants as monstrous, primitive, or uncanny. As Jones observes, such representations are indicative of 'an overarching colonial or hegemonic process which included ... [not only] the practices of colonisers, travel writers, cultural theorists, popular novelists, and even Hollywood film-makers' but also the responses of indigenous writers and artists.

A contrasting comparative model is adopted by Terence Brown in his essay 'The Irish Dylan Thomas: Versions and Influences', which reveals how the Welsh poet has functioned as an inspiration for a range of twentieth-century Irish poets. Yet this is no traditional or static model of influence and response but rather a study that is fully alive to regional and cultural particularities. In a detailed and illuminating engagement with a range of works by Dylan Thomas, Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice, Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, the essay traces the threads of interconnection between 'young provincials' in Swansea, Belfast, London, Cork, and Dublin, revealing in so doing that monolithic conceptions of Wales and Ireland within a comparative framework are inadequate.

While this issue opens with O'Leary's historical account of individual interventions in the debate about the future of the Celtic languages of Wales and Ireland, it moves to a conclusion with Colin Williams' essay on contemporary language planning in the two countries, entitled 'Foras na Gaeilge and Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg: Yoked But Not Yet Shackled'. Williams' focus is on 'the implementation of official language policy' in Ireland and Wales as inflected by a series of sometimes contradictory pressures. The essay provides a comprehensive survey of these pressures and interrogates the role and effectiveness of the two statutory language bodies in fostering the survival of minority national languages. The essay's contribution resides not only in its authoritative overview of the contemporary scene but also in the trenchancy of the comparison made between the situations of the two Celtic languages.

A similarly engaged account of the role of language in the formation of Irish and Welsh identities is provided by Daniel G. Williams in his essay 'Another Lost Cause? Pan-Celticism, "Race" and Language'. Williams' essay deploys Žižek's notion of the 'redemptive moment' in order to re-evaluate the phenomenon of *fin-de-siècle* pan-Celticism. In so doing, he identifies some of the negative consequences of the contemporary derogation of the 'ethnic' identity embodied in pan-Celticism in favour of the 'civic' identity preferred by contemporary liberal democracy. Chief among these is a chimerical multiculturalism that pays insufficient attention to very real forms of difference, in particular those embodied in language. Multiculturalism can, in fact, mask an Anglocentrism that may, in turn, be exposed by a renewed engagement with pan-Celticism.

The final article in the issue, 'Speculating: Patrick McGuinness interviews Paul Muldoon', takes a somewhat different form from the preceding essays. It is a record of an exchange that took place between Muldoon and the Wales-based poet Patrick McGuinness in Cardiff on 15 December 2007. On the previous evening, Muldoon had given a public reading at Cardiff University under the title "'Myself and Pangu': Paul Muldoon reads poems, including some of his own, from and about Wales'. In a wide-ranging conversation, the two poets touch on many of the issues that inform the essays in this volume, including comparisons, disconnections, language, and community. Their discussion of a shared Welsh and Irish literary tradition returns us to the notion of a Celtic heritage with which this introduction began. Muldoon's vivid translation of the fourteenth-century Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym's poem 'Y Gal', which ends the volume, demonstrates the continuing vibrancy of the Celtic context and brings us back to Terence Brown's invocation of 'shared intimacies'.

Notes

1. See the description of Master's courses in Celtic Studies at http://grad.mml.ox.ac.uk/celtic_studies.
2. O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales*, 90.

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