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Ordinary Eyesight? Cultural comparisons between Ireland and Wales

Abstract

Is it possible to see Ireland from Wales? And can Wales be glimpsed from the east coast of Ireland? The question resonates through the two cultures and enables a fresh perspective on the question of Irish-Welsh cultural connections along with a topographically-grounded approach to the imaginative work of comparison itself: what it means to see one country from the perspective of another.

Essay

Comparisons between Ireland and Wales are foundational to Celtic Studies as it is practised in universities, a methodological assumption that should sit well with Joep Leerssen's insistence on the necessity of a "cross-national comparative approach" to the study of national cultures.[1] And yet comparative research between Ireland and Wales has tended to be confined to pre-historic and medieval contexts, largely concerned with legend, literature and philology.[2]

Perhaps the proximate nature of the Ireland–Wales case deprives it of a degree of interest: two smallish countries separated by a narrow sea and joined by centuries of shared political experience within the same archipelago. Those very likenesses further make it difficult to grasp the asymmetries born of modernity: the traumas of Famine in Ireland, Welsh hostility toward immigrant Irish labourers who in turn were ignorant of the growth of organized labour in Wales, the cultural differences between Non-Conformity and Catholicism. But then again, even as we consider the cleavages wrought by eighteenth and nineteenth-century developments, from the Industrial Revolution to famine and revolution, we encounter the near-contemporaneous role of the first and second Celtic revivals in covering over these splits and fractures. Perhaps the best-known example of this process is the publication of Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature,* an essay that hymns eternal Celtic affinities even as the Fenian cause grew support in Ireland, Britain and the United States.[3]

These patterns of connection and disconnection are threaded through the modern history of Ireland's relationships with Wales. When the Irish scholar Cecile O'Rahilly won a prize at the 1920 Barry National Eisteddfod for her essay *Ireland and Wales: Their Historical and Literary Relations*, she remarked that there was "scant sympathy between the Irish and Welsh people."[4] It's easy to see how, in 1920, difference rather than similarity might have sounded the dominant note. In Ireland, the year saw the establishment of a provisional republican legal system, the death of the Lord Mayor of Cork on hunger strike in Brixton prison and

1 Leerssen, "Nationalism and the Cultivation of Culture," p. 564.
2 See Connolly and Gramich, "Introduction," pp. 1–4.
3 Howes, *Yeats's Nations*, p. 20.
4 O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales*, p. 90.

the burning of Cork by the Black and Tans. In Wales, the country enjoyed a short-lived economic boom, a royal charter was granted to a new college of the University of Wales in Swansea and the Church in Wales was formally created. No wonder that Cecile O'Rahilly thought that the views of Giraldus Cambrensis on Ireland—"they hold to their bond with no one … This race is a race of savages"—might well be "from a speech made in the British House of Commons" of her own day.[5]

A distinguished Irish medievalist who lived in Wales and retained lifelong friendships there, O'Rahilly must have understood how such prejudices were born.[6] But her scholarly study confines itself to proper Celtic Studies ground: kinship and parallels between the medieval languages and literatures of Ireland and Wales. Even where she ventures into "Nineteenth-Century Political Relations," the emphasis is on connection and the optimistic idea of David Lloyd George as unifying figure: "It was a Welsh Prime Minister of England who conducted the negotiations between Ireland and England which led to the signing of the Treaty in December 1921."[7]

O'Rahilly's faith in the resilience of Welsh–Irish relationships in the context of the sundering of the United Kingdom gives testament to the remarkable cultural work done by the nineteenth-century discourse of Celticism in connecting "highly disparate"[8] phenomena. Yet it is also worth noting how often O'Rahilly locates the search for parallels and likenesses within the context of actual geographies of connection between two islands separated by a narrow sea. Speculating on contacts between Ireland and Wales in the third century, for instance, O'Rahilly suggest that it is improbable that Ireland did not traffic with its neighbours, "a land the shores of which were actually visible."[9] She quotes Kuno Myer's speculations on the lines of war and trade that crossed the sea just "where the coast of Britain projects towards Ireland, and where, in clear weather, the land is plainly visible from the sister isle."[10] In what follows I take up this question of geographical proximity and trace connections between Ireland and Wales in terms of patterns of sight, vision and perspective, expressed in a range of registers. Enduring topographical realities run beneath the "hue of meditative otherworldliness"[11] associated with the first and second Celtic revivals; geography, in turn, feeds new imaginative possibilities.

Perhaps the best place to begin to join these ideas is with a discussion of a tale fundamental to the

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5 O'Rahilly, "The Antipathy of Irish and Welsh," p. 226.

6 O'Rahilly (1894–1980) undertook doctoral research at the University of Wales in Bangor before going on to teach in Beaumaris Grammar and Cardiff High School. She returned to an assistant professorship in the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in 1946 and was appointed to a full professorship in 1956, the first time a woman held such a post.

7 O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales*, p. 91.

8 Leerssen, "Celticism," p. 1.

9 O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales*, p. 36.

10 O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales*, p. 47.

11 Leerssen, "Cúchulain in the General Post Office," p. 144.

conception of Ireland within Welsh culture. The story of Branwen from the Second Branch of the Mabinogi opens with Bendigeidgfran, King of Britain, sitting with his brother on the rock of Harlech, looking across the sea to Ireland. "As they were sitting there, they could see thirteen ships coming from the south of Ireland, heading towards them easily and swiftly, the wind behind them, and they were approaching with speed." The ships have been sent by Matholwch, King of Ireland, who wishes to marry Branwen, the sister of the giant Bendigeidgfran, in order to unite the kingdoms. They marry but, because of an earlier insult offered to Matholwch, the Irish punish Branwen, forcing her "to cook for the court; and they had the butcher come to her every day, after he had chopped up meat, and give her a box on the ear." Over the three years of her punishment, Branwen "reared a starling at the end of her kneading-trough, and taught it to speak, and told the bird what kind of man her brother was." Hearing from the starling of his sister's mistreatment by the Irish, Bendigeidgfran vows revenge. This time, the view from the sea shore yields hostility and not unity. Swineherds on the strand witness "a forest on the sea" and their vision of "a huge mountain" moving towards Ireland that turns out to be the enraged giant Bendigeidgfran wading across the water to save his sister. After the battle, Branwen is borne home to Wales. Arriving at the mouth of the river Alaw in Anglesey with the seven survivors of the war against the Irish, she takes one final look back across the sea to Ireland, heaves a heartbroken sigh and dies on the spot, declaring "Two good islands have been laid waste because of me."[12]

Such glances over and back across the Irish sea resonate through the two cultures. A rich archive presents itself of writers who see (or fail to see) one country from the other: Anglesey glimpsed from the Wicklow hills; the Dublin mountains seen from Holyhead. These questions of looking are intimately shaped by weather, topography and sightlines but more broadly address the imaginative work of comparison itself: what it means to see one country from the perspective of another.

The earliest natural history of Ireland, compiled by the Dutch physician Gerard Boate in 1652, asserts that "a man whose sight is but of an ordinary goodness, may at any time in clear weather with ease discern the high and mountainous coast of Wales from the top of the Dublin mountains." The observation is adduced in order to prove the proximity of two islands tied together by nature, only "forty leagues, or sixscore English miles" apart.[13] Published in the context of the Cromwellian plantation of Ireland, Boate's history has an explicitly political and improving agenda that is echoed throughout later eighteenth-century accounts. An anonymous eighteenth-century tour of Ireland, for example, opens in Wales and the view "From an Eminence to the Left of the Town [Holyhead]." From there, "with the Help of a Glass, we can see

12 *The Mabinogion*, pp. 22–33.

13 Boate, *Gerard Boate's Natural History of Ireland*, p. 2.

the Mountains of *Wicklow*, distant, S. W. (as a Sailor told us) about sixteen Miles from *Dublin*."[14]

The idea that Ireland and Wales are within easy visual reach of one another and thus naturally connected retains a role throughout eighteenth-century travel narratives. Visiting Pembrokeshire in the south-west of Wales, Daniel Defoe sought out a view of Ireland. He remarked that "Here the Weather being very Clear, we had a full view of *Ireland*, tho' at a very great Distance: The Land here is call'd St. *Davids Head*, and from hence, there has some time ago, gone a Passage Boat constantly between *England* and *Ireland*, but that Voiture is at present discontinued." From Pembrokeshire, Defoe travelled north past the Menai straits to the island Angelsea and on to Holyhead, "where we went for no purpose, but to have another view of *Ireland*, tho' we were disappointed, the Weather being Bad and Stormy."[15]

The ideological implications of being able to take in such views are spelled out by the Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant (1726–1798) in a striking passage where he describes an ascent of Snowdon. Pennant recalls the view as "unbounded" and he imagines the landscape forming itself before his eyes in a ready map of the four nations of the British Isles:

> In a former tour, I saw from it the county of *Chester*, the high hills of *Yorkshire*, part of the north of *England, Scotland,* and *Ireland:* a plain view of the *Isle of Man*; and that of *Anglesea* lay extended like a map beneath us, with every rill visible. I took much pains to see this prospect to advantage; sat up at a farm on the west till about twelve, and walked up the whole way. The night was remarkably fine and starry: towards morn, the stars faded away, and left a short interval of darkness, which was soon dispersed by the dawn of day. The body of the sun appeared most distinct, with the rotundity of the moon, before it rose high enough to render its beams too brilliant for our sight. The sea which bounded the western part was gilt by its beams, first in slender streaks, at length glowed with redness. The prospect was disclosed to us like the gradual drawing up of a curtain in a theatre.[16]

Pennant's account of a geopolitical drama visible as the curtain goes up derives from a long tradition of loco-descriptive poems that afford panoramic perspectives, originating in the *New Arcadia* (1590) when Philip Sidney describes a position that, from "pretty height," "gives the eye lordship over a good large circuit."[17] This lordship of the eye is associated with the type of prospect that tends towards an extensive moral vision, in this case connected with the right and necessary interdependence of component parts of what was soon to be the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

Perspectives may have shifted with the advent of the Union, but we can continue to locate William Wordsworth in a line of prospect poems that naturalize the relationship between Ireland and Britain. His

14 *A Tour through Ireland*, p. 47.
15 Defoe, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, pp. 87, 93.
16 Pennant, *The Journey to Snowdon*, pp. 163–164.
17 Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, p. 62.

"View from the Top of Black Comb," published in 1815, sees the poet atop a mountain in Cumbria, looking across the landscape from a "height a ministering Angel might select":

> For from the summit of Black Comb (dread name
> Derived from clouds and storms!) the amplest range
> Of unobstructed prospect may be seen
> That British ground commands …



In Wordsworth's poem, "a line of eye-sight" links English, Scottish, and Welsh hills and rivers, as well as "Mona's Isle"—the Isle of Man or Anglesea. Ireland is a sea-blue line just beyond the sea:

> Yon azure Ridge,
> Is it a perishable cloud? Or there
> Do we behold the frame of Erin's Coast?
> Land sometimes by the roving shepherd swain,
> Like the bright confines of another world
> Not doubtfully perceived.—Look homeward now!
> In depth, in height, in circuit, how serene
> The spectacle, how pure!—Of Nature's works,
> In earth, and air, and earth-embracing sea,
> A Revelation infinite it seems;
> Display august of man's inheritance,
> Of Britain's calm felicity and power.[18]

As Brandon Yen has shown, Ireland's place in this vision of "British ground" is "ambiguous," characterized by an uncertain question rather than a commanding vision. Picking up on Wordsworth's allusion to Milton in his description of "Erin's coast" as "the bright confines of another world," Yen further suggests that reference to *Paradise Lost* "implies a wish to incorporate 'Erin' into a unitary sense of nationhood," "mixed, perhaps unconsciously, with the ambivalences of an outsider."[19]

Such "ambivalences" sound a characteristically romantic note, but they also express actual uncertainties of vision, the uncertainties made by sky, sea and weather. Does Wordsworth see a cloud or might it be possible to discern the east coast of Ireland along with parts of England and Wales from Cumbria? Ireland is separated from the Welsh coast by about 122 kilometres while the distance between the Llyn Peninsula and the Wicklow Mountains is as little as 50 kilometres. To this day, tourists in clear weather take photographs

18 Wordsworth, *Shorter Poems*, pp. 99–100.
19 Yen, "Wordsworth in Ireland," p. 18.

of Snowdonia from the Wicklow Mountains or tweet images for the Wicklow mountains glimpsed from the Llyn Peninsula. Online message boards are full of tourists who want to know "Can you see Ireland from Wales?" while a Google search reveals many versions of the same question asked from the other side.

Throughout the nineteenth century, such sightlines were called up in the imagination or recorded from elevated routes. At the end of his 1902 history of the Holyhead Road, tracing its magnificent passage from London through to Anglesey, Charles Harper poses a resonant question, which he answers with a further query: "Whether Ireland […] can be seen, lying afar off, like cloudbanks upon the horizon, is a matter for the most favourable weather, the keenest eyesight, and the most robust faith to decide in the affirmative, or for scepticism to deny."[20]

No less a sceptic than Samuel Beckett recalled "wonderful memories" of seeing North Wales from the Wicklow mountains while walking with his father as a child. A 1948 letter to the French writer Georges Duthuit explains Beckett's plan to "have lunch, then go for a walk on the long green slopes from where, on a clear day, when I was a child, I used to see the mountains of Wales." He will drink a "few pints," Beckett tells his friend, and watch the evening draw in "and the sea light up—the harbour, the town, the headlands. Romantic landscape but dry old stick of a traveller."[21] The scene is recognizable both in particular and in abstract ways: a detailed evocation of the Wicklow hills that contains the impress of a narrative shape familiar from Beckett's prose: "the focal character alone in the hills of South Dublin, near the sea, contending with memories of his father or mother."[22] The hastily sketched-in tension between romantic and "dry" perspectives not only addresses different perspectives but also the possibilities of sight, memory and connection, as if to figure what Joep Leerssen calls the "doubts and uncertainties" of Celticism itself.[23]

A final example showing how wider "doubts and uncertainties" inhere in the very texture of views over and back the Irish sea comes from a recent short story by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, "Little Red." The story concerns a publisher named Fiona whose adventures in online dating take a dark turn when a man appears at her patio door. The man, Declan, has chatted to Fiona online and—with some creepy "detective work"—found her address, entered her home and asked for food, which she provides. Ní Dhuibhne's mysterious and open-ended narrative plays with the plot of Little Red Riding Hood while gathering about itself the Gothic shades of Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover." Bowen's story is set in 1941 during the Blitz and ends with a terrified woman beating against the glass partition of a taxi that "accelerat[ed] without mercy" through deserted streets.[24] Fairy tales and war-time London may seem very far from the location of the sto-

20 Harper, *The Holyhead Road*, p. 326.
21 Beckett, *Letters*, p. 87.
22 Pearson, *Irish Cosmopolitanism*, p. 111.
23 Leerssen, "Celticism," p. 2.
24 Bowen, *The Demon Lover*, p. 87.

ry—"a bungalow by the sea, south of Wicklow town"—but Fiona's relationship with her house is intimately connected with its sightlines across to Wales and the role of literature itself in shaping horizons. Some lines of remembered verse from a Welsh poem once widely taught in Irish primary schools ("Leisure" by W.H. Davies: "What is this life if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare") prompt a reverie:

> But she's beginning to get it. What is life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare. No time to stand beneath the boughs and stare as long as sheep or cows. The poet is saying that the capacity to stand and stare like a cow is a virtue. But is it? Really?
>
> She is staring at something. The apple trees. The long grass—knapweed, montbretia, thistles, grass—that wild stuff. The roof of a house below. The sea. The horizon … beyond, the coast of Wales, which you never see from here although it's not far away.[25]

Wales is never visible and not far away: with this curious negative formulation, Ní Dhuibhne's narrative draws a delicate line of connection between the capacities of ordinary eyesight and the continuing power of Celtic sightlines.

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25 Ní Dhuibhne, *Little Red and Other Stories*, pp. 9–10.

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