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Eoin MacNeill and the Recovery of Irish Identity

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In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the question of the true identity and nature of the Irish assumed critical importance. One particular historian, Eoin MacNeill (1867-1945), worked to recover and define the Irish identity on its own merits. Through his writings, he focused on Irish laws, history, language, and institutions in defense of Ireland and its people.

A primary factor responsible for the rising sense of Irish national crisis was the Great Famine of 1845-1849, which devastated Ireland as a country and as a culture. The enormous drop in population due to death and emigration led to a loss in cultural awareness and vitality. Of an initial population of approximately eight million people, the Famine killed about one million and spurred a mass exodus from Ireland which, within ten years, totaled another one and a half million Irish. At the outset of the Famine, about one-half the population – more than four million people - spoke Irish as their first language. Six years later, with the population reduced to six and a half million, only 23 percent still spoke Irish and five percent claimed it as their only language.¹ As the countryside emptied, then stabilized at less than one-half the pre-Famine levels, a great silence fell over the Irish people. The effects of the Famine were felt economically, socially, politically, and culturally for decades.²

The millions of Irish people who made their living off the land were particularly affected. The Famine had galvanized small groups of radicals like the Fenians in support of Irish national independence. In the 1870s, Irish tenant farmers for the first time joined

¹ F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland: 1890-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 8 and Alvin Jackson, *Ireland: 1798-1998* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999), 69.

² For additional reading on the Great Famine, its origins, and its implications, see Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (New York: Dutton, 1962) and Cormac O'Grada, *Black '47 and Beyond: the Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

organized *political* movements to break the hold of Anglo-Protestant landlords.³ Michael Davitt and other nationalists founded the Land League. The League's purpose was to oppose landlords who attempted to evict tenants and to reduce land prices so that poor farmers could buy their holdings. The genius of Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891), a young politician from County Wicklow, was to see that the grievances relating to land reform could be grafted onto a rising national consciousness about the governance of the island itself. Parnell became leader of both the agitation over land and the political movement devoted to bringing about 'Home Rule' for a self-governing Irish nation. Parnell's greatest victory lay in convincing the British Liberal Party leader and statesman, W. E. Gladstone, that the Irish cause transcended economic grievances. In 1885 Gladstone committed the Liberals to Irish Home Rule. However, two bills were defeated in Parliament in 1886 and 1893, and Parnell had died in disgrace because of his scandalous affair with the wife of a fellow Irish politician.⁴

The fall of Parnell and the Conservative Party dominance in Britain crippled the 'constitutional' path toward Irish autonomy for a generation. Many nationalists turned to other avenues to express what they saw as Irish culture and identity.⁵ This movement is referred to as the Gaelic Revival. Although it ultimately depended on the English language, the "new nationalism" of the late nineteenth century gained its momentum from the nationalist's belief that the "Anglicization of Irish culture" could be stopped by encouraging a "Gaelic revival." In particular, the Gaelic Revival involved the revival of

³ See Jackson, *Ireland: 1798-1998*. Jackson is particularly good at outlining the effects on farmers and agricultural laborers, which would eventually contribute to the Land Question, Home Rule, and the Gaelic Revival.

⁴ See F.S.L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁵ See Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1-25.

the Irish language, resurgence in the Irish literary movement, and the promotion of Irish sports and games.⁶ The remaining Irish people needed reminding of the distinctive traditions of sport, music, language, and social organization that constituted the spirit of the Irish nation. As Douglas Hyde wrote in his famous essay *On the Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland*, “it is our Gaelic past which, though the Irish race does not recognize it just at present, is really at the bottom of the Irish heart, and prevents us becoming citizens of the [British] empire, as, I think, can be easily proved.”⁷

Eoin MacNeill was at the center of the political, revolutionary and cultural movements of Irish nationalism described above.⁸ Born in Glenarm, County Antrim on May 15, 1867, MacNeill was the son of a Catholic working-class baker and merchant. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the Royal University of Ireland in economics, jurisprudence, and constitutional history in 1888. Three years later he moved to the Aran Island of Inismeadhon to learn the spoken Irish language. After satisfying himself to a degree with his competency in the language, he helped found the Gaelic League with

⁶ An example of the promotion of Irish games and sports is the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), founded in the late nineteenth century, which called young males to participate in sports such as football and hurling. It was soon infiltrated by the Irish Republican Brotherhood and by combining recreation with politics the GAA set a precedent for Gaelic revival movements all over the country, and attracted widespread support. For more information on societies like the GAA, R.V. Comerford’s essay “Patriotism as Pastime: The Appeal of Fenianism in the Mid-1860s” in *Reactions to Irish Nationalism: 1865-1915* is an excellent resource. The Irish literary movement was led by writers such as William Butler Yeats, John O’Leary, James O’Grady and Douglas Hyde. For more information see, Joseph Coohill, *Ireland: A Short History*. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), pp 112-141.

⁷ Douglas Hyde was a very important member of the Gaelic Revival and the Easter Rising of 1916. The Gaelic League was founded in 1893 in response to Hyde’s appeal, first addressed to the Irish National Literary Society in Dublin, November 25 1892. Hyde asserted that Britain’s claims to having educated and civilized Ireland had done exactly the opposite. He argued that Ireland’s position to Britain was “anomalous...imitating England and yet apparently hating it...” Hyde was a politician more than a historian or philologist, but his sentiments mirrored Eoin MacNeill’s in the sense that both believed that “Irishness” needed to be restored to the Irish people. [Douglas Hyde, “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland,” in *Irish Historical Documents: 1172-1922*, eds. Edmund Curtis and R.B. McDowell (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc. and London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1968), pp. 310-313]

⁸ The only published biography of MacNeill is Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill, Scholar and Man of Action, 1867-1945*. For a recent assessment see Patrick Maume, “MacNeill, Eoin (1867–1945),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34813, accessed 15 Dec 2009]

Douglas Hyde, and became its first honorary secretary in 1893. Originally named the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language, the Gaelic League was devoted to ensuring the vitality and strength of Irish culture – and especially the language itself - in everyday life.⁹ By 1903, 1,300 National Schools had introduced Irish into their curriculum, and in 1909 it was made mandatory.¹⁰ Leaning on his strength as a teacher, in 1897 MacNeill was appointed the first professor of Irish at Drumcondra Teachers' Training College. He was elected as a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1907, followed two years later by his appointment as professor of early (including medieval) Irish history in University College, Dublin.

MacNeill's scholarly life took a different turn in 1913 when he helped found the Irish Volunteers. The Volunteers were a militia force that eventually mobilized 160,000 Irishmen – mostly Catholics – on behalf of Home Rule legislation passed by the Liberal government in London between 1912 and 1914.¹¹ MacNeill supported its formation because he believed that the Ulster Volunteers, already organizing in the Protestant north to resist Home Rule, left Irish patriots no choice but to mobilize in defense of their rights and liberties.¹² In 1913, MacNeill engaged in an enthusiastic recruiting effort to bring as

⁹ Coohill, *Ireland: A Short History*, 117-118.

¹⁰ More information can be found on the Gaelic League in Brian O Cuiv's essay "MacNeill and the Irish Language" in F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne, eds., *The Scholar Revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867-1945, and the Making of the New Ireland*. Cuiv's essay describes the goals, success, and support surrounding the League. Joseph Coohill in *Ireland*, 118, describes the impact of the Gaelic League, writing that it grew from "being simply an organization to promote the Irish language, to a movement to invigorate the country."

¹¹ S. J. Connolly, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 270

¹² For a comprehensive overview of the political crisis of 1911-1914, see Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Question: Two Centuries of Conflict*. 2nd ed. (The University Press of Kentucky, 1995). McCaffrey describes the formation of more aggressive and extreme forms of nationalism in the prewar years that sparked clashes between the Ulster Volunteers and the Irish Volunteers and stirred almost fanatic anti-British sentiment among the Irish people.

many volunteers into the movement as possible.¹³ MacNeill never intended that the Irish Volunteers become a rebellious force bent on martyring themselves for the Irish cause. He argued against the martyr mentality pervasive in Irish culture that “teaches young people to regard their country or their nation not so much as a thing which they should be satisfied to serve, but rather as a stage upon which they may expect to play a part in the drama of heroism.”¹⁴ While the desire to sacrifice for your own country was understandable, MacNeill argued that the ability to employ the use of force and to die for a country does not make the cause more worthy. “We can see that every cause and every variety of cause has its martyrs and that leaders who are ready to make what is called ‘the supreme sacrifice’ do not prove the superiority of one cause over another.” MacNeill’s opposition to symbolic bloodshed, or the “gospel of nationality,” that drove many to support and instigate political violence resulted in his falling out with the leaders of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Those leaders later blamed MacNeill for failing to mobilize the Volunteers to support the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin.¹⁵

As leader of the Irish Volunteers, MacNeill was court-martialed by the British nonetheless and sentenced to life in prison on May 24, 1916. Released with most of the other Easter Rebellion prisoners in 1917, he became a member of the Sinn Fein Central Committee in 1919 and Minister for Finance and Industries in the Sinn Fein shadow government. MacNeill earned a Doctor of Literature from the National University of Ireland in 1921. A year later he was appointed the Minister of Education in the new Irish

¹³ Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill*, 118.

¹⁴ MacNeill’s unpublished memoirs, MacNeill Papers, University College Dublin.

¹⁵ For more information on the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, see Gabriel Doherty, Dermot Keogh, eds., *1916 : The Long Revolution* (Cork : Mercier Press, 2007), Michael McNally, *Easter Rising 1916 : Birth of the Irish Republic* (New York : Osprey Publishers, 2007), McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*. Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill*, 183-227 details MacNeill’s involvement, ignorance, and frustrations with different facets of the event.

Free State, a position he held until 1925. MacNeill's failures to modify the partition borders between Ulster and the Free State during the Boundary Commission negotiations of 1924 ensured his eclipse as a politician and statesman. Retiring from political life MacNeill returned to University College, Dublin, where he continued to write prolifically on Irish history, language and literature. He received several distinguished titles including first president of the Irish Historical Society, president of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and president of the Royal Irish Academy. Eoin MacNeill died on October 15, 1945.¹⁶

The revolutionary turmoil of the 1912-1914 Home Rule crisis, the First World War, and the Anglo-Irish War turned Eoin MacNeill into a political organizer, a journalist and editor, and a government minister. His legacy lies in his contributions as a scholar, linguist, and historian as he himself wrote in his memoirs.¹⁷ "Politics were and have remained for me a secondary matter and a subservient matter as regards Irish Nationality."¹⁸ The most vital aspect of MacNeill was his quest to define the particular nature of Irish national identity, a cultural and historical essence that was not simply a bundle of anti-British traits and sentiments. MacNeill wanted to answer one of the hardest questions a citizen could ask: what does being Irish mean? Through his research, MacNeill discovered a new definition of Irish nationalism, one that was dependent solely on the merits of the Irish. MacNeill strove to transcend politics and highlight an

¹⁶ Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill*, 383-385.

¹⁷ The range of activities in MacNeill's life can be seen in the essays in F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne, eds., *The Scholar Revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867-1945, and the Making of the New Ireland* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1973).

¹⁸ MacNeill's unpublished memoirs, MacNeill Papers, University College Dublin.

understanding of the Irish as a “distinct people” by examining Ireland’s ancient traditions, institutions, and laws.¹⁹

MacNeill wrote hundreds of letters, notes, and manuscripts now housed in the National Library of Ireland and the University College, Dublin. Not surprisingly much of his correspondence was in Irish. However, his published works were produced in English, and meant to reach a wide audience. *Phases of Irish History*, published in 1919, was the first comprehensive scholarly study of ancient Irish history. MacNeill described the oldest peoples of Ireland, the Celtic colonization of the British Isles, the early government and laws of Ireland, the introduction of Christianity, and Ireland’s struggle with the Normans. He focused heavily on what defined the Irish people as a nation, and contradicted many commonly held assumptions about the nature of the “Celt” and the “Irishman.”²⁰ *Early Irish Laws and Institutions* appeared in 1934. It was a compilation of MacNeill’s speeches and lectures regarding the construction and execution of laws in early Ireland. From the *Pax Romana* to the Brehon law, MacNeill succinctly defended the idea of Ireland as a national community, not a conglomerate of different tribes and clans. Published twenty years after his death, MacNeill’s *Saint Patrick* was based almost wholly on the saint’s writings. MacNeill was devoted to a careful study of Patrician history, and described St. Patrick’s entire life, from early childhood to death. Biography was a departure from MacNeill’s other books, but even in this work, MacNeill focused on the Irish nation and its development into an entirely Christian country. These sources, combined with his memoirs and other archival materials, allow for a reconstruction of

¹⁹ Eoin MacNeill, *Saint Patrick*, ed. John Ryan (Clonmore and Reynolds Ltd., 1964), 9, 10, 13.

²⁰ Eoin MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, Ltd., 1937), index.

Eoin MacNeill's life work - his project to recover an historic Irish identity both true to the past, and useful for the future of the newly autonomous Irish of the 20th century.

Ultimately, what Eoin MacNeill wanted to accomplish was a revision of fundamental errors regarding the history of Ireland. MacNeill once wrote that “nearly every generalization that has passed current about things Celtic or things supposed to be Celtic...stands equally in need of revision and rectification.” He noted that when he began his studies, his own approach to Irish history reflected the assumptions and conclusions that were “in vogue” at the time. Only with extensive research was he able to see clearly the misconceptions and misrepresentations of the commonly held views.²¹ MacNeill became convinced that there had been an overall degradation of Irish history over the last century due to misinterpretation of traditional Irish laws and institutions resulting from poor translation and lack of knowledge of the original documents.. Although, written Irish history did not begin until Saint Patrick came to Ireland, MacNeill pointed out that a rich ancient history of Ireland was accessible to those who could marry tradition and legend with an objective historical account of a society.²²

MacNeill believed one of the sentiments that prevented a true understanding of the Irish was a pervasive “Celtophobia,” which he described as the “natural counterpart of Anglosaxonomania.”²³ The most important facets of British “Celtophobia” were manifested in ideas and stereotypes about race, religion, and class. As Michael de Nie writes, “in British eyes, the eternal Paddy was forever a Celt, a Catholic, and a

²¹ Eoin MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions* (Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1934), 25-26.

²² MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 114.

²³ MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, 25.

peasant.”²⁴ While the technical definition of “race” changed over the course of the Victorian era, the idea was always implicit (and often explicit) that some “races” were inherently inferior to others. Many Britons accepted the stereotype that the Celtic race was not only different, but lesser. Complex ‘scientific’ studies supposedly established the physical evidence of a racial purity embodied by true Britons, which the Irish failed to match.²⁵ “Paddy,” according to the English, was not only Celtic, he was Catholic. The British media disseminated a widespread, simplistic stereotype of Irish Catholics that combined physical, moral, and intellectual qualities into an unflattering whole. The Catholic Irish were superstitious and gullible. Their clergy led a blind flock towards overpopulation and starvation by encouraging the Irish to marry early and have many children. This kind of “religious subservience” led to a dissolution of intellect, economics, and culture.²⁶ Irish Catholics were “an inferior, simian-featured, irresponsible, irrational, and emotional subspecies incapable of managing their own affairs.”²⁷ An “inferior race,” the “Celtic people, whether in Ireland or on the Continent, had never experienced those free institutions which belonged to the Anglo-Saxon

²⁴ Michael de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798-1882* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 7. See also Peter Gray, ed., *Victoria's Ireland? Irishness and Britishness: 1837-1901* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004).

²⁵ In *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 7-8, L. Perry Curtis Jr. cites the Dutch physiognomic scientist Pieter Camper in an effort to demonstrate the lengths to which many went to prove racial superiority. Camper devoted much of his research to the difference between the “facial angles” in the skulls of different races. He subjected “monkeys, orangutans, Negroes, Kalmucks, and Europeans” to his studies, and offered his findings as proof that there were distinctly “higher” forms of life. The facial angle was created by “the intersection of two lines, one running diagonally or vertically...from the forehead to the foremost point of the front teeth or incisors, and the other running horizontally from the opening of the ear to the nostrils.” The normal and desirable facial angle for a respectable European, Camper asserted, was between 70° and 80°. Anything less was proof of “barbarism or a more primitive life.” Negroes, Celts, and Kalmucks fell outside of the “perfect” 80° facial angle. For more information on detailed studies of races and features of Celts, refer to *Apes and Angels*, which provides excellent research on the scientific and cultural manifestation of British racism towards the Irish.

²⁶ De Nie, *The Eternal Paddy*, 17.

²⁷ McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*, 111.

heritage.”²⁸ The Celts’ inability to create centralizing institutions of law and government was particularly held against them.

While the undesirable Irish traits manifested in “Paddy” were Catholicism, Celticism, and peasant status, the epitome of the Briton was “John Bull.” He was Protestant, Anglo-Saxon and middle-class. His qualities were far removed from the primitiveness that the British perceived in their Irish neighbors. John Bull’s traits “included self-control, reason, honesty, love for order and freedom, manliness, character, respect for the law, sobriety, and a firm dislike for enthusiasm or emotionalism.” The Irish were polar opposites: “superstitious, feckless, improvident, duplicitous, and given to drink.” These traits, according to Britons, made the Irish “like other subject peoples of the empire, half-civilized, unstable, and unprepared to govern their own affairs.”²⁹

Thus the Irish, simply by virtue of their race and ethnicity, did not exist in the same cultural and political framework as the English, and were therefore not to be trusted with creating their own institutions or “attending to the myriad problems of Irish government,” including poverty, famine, religion, and Ireland’s relationship with the British.³⁰ English cultural superiority and confidence in their governmental system led to an ideology that Curtis referred to as “Anglo-Saxonism,”³¹ the conviction that it was England’s responsibility to “Anglicize” Ireland. According to Curtis, the idea of Anglicizing Ireland practically translated to “a policy of enforced acculturation with the object of converting the ‘Irishry’ into docile hewers of wood” and making “the native

²⁸ L. Perry Curtis Jr., *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Connecticut: University of Bridgeport, 1968), 12.

²⁹ The above quotes from De Nie, *The Eternal Paddy*, 23.

³⁰ Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts*, 1. The new, elected County Council system of local government created in Britain in 1888 was not extended to Ireland for another decade.

³¹ Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts*, 6, 12, 19.

Irish conform as much as possible” to English ideas of dress, attitude, and behavior. The only good to come of Ireland would be what Ireland received from Britain. Arguably, the only positive developments, were in areas where they borrowed from the British example.

A prominent politician and author who exemplified such views was Arthur James Balfour, the Edwardian prime minister of England from 1902 to 1905 and a former Chief Secretary for Ireland.³² His essay, *Nationality and Home Rule* (1913) addressed Irish nationalism by discussing the country’s traditions of government, religion, and culture. He stated that nothing had ever succeeded in Ireland that was not first borrowed from the British. Even the undoubted achievements of the Irish as writers and dramatists were accomplished using the English language and contempt for law and order was part of their national character. Like Balfour, many Britons in the century after the Act of Union came to regard the Irish as useful for menial labor that “other people were too weak or too proud to do” or “entertainers with exaggerated brogues.” Frequently happy and drunk, they were also a frightening race, “brutal, wild, lawless, uncivilized.”³³ Eoin MacNeill grew up hearing these stereotypes. They provided much for him to study and refute.

To the question of who the Irish were as a people, MacNeill began by asking whether being Celtic was a racial-biological category. He also addressed in great detail the laws

³² Ruddock Mackay and H. C. G. Matthew, “Balfour, Arthur James, first earl of Balfour (1848–1930),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004). [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30553, accessed 16 Dec 2009]. Catherine Shannon, *Arthur J. Balfour and Ireland, 1874-1922* (1988) and David Hudson, *The Ireland that We Made: Arthur and Gerald Balfour’s Contribution to the Making of Modern Ireland* (Akron: University of Akron Press, 2003).

³³ McCaffrey, *The Irish Question*, 7.

and institutions of early Ireland because his studies showed that ancient Ireland was not at all a “barbaric” culture. He argued that the supposed clan system so long considered Ireland’s form of social organization never existed as assumed. MacNeill, in addition to examining the historical laws and government of the Irish, also explored the language and the religion of the Irish.

MacNeill acknowledged that the ancient Irish were a Celtic people, but he argued that there was confusion about what that implied. He asserted that every people had two kinds of descent: blood and tradition. Biological race implied a group of people whose physical characteristics, inherited from their ancestors and evolved to survive in their current climate or living conditions, distinguished them markedly from other groups of people.³⁴ Were the Irish people a race by this definition? No, “the answer is undoubted - every ancient people that is known to have spoken any Celtic language is said to be a Celtic people. The term Celtic is indicative of tradition and language, not of race.”³⁵ Interestingly, on this particular point, Balfour was in agreement with MacNeill. He also said that the peoples of the British Isles had multiple bloodlines, and that innate biological distinctions were unproven. If nationalism were to be defined by pure racial bloodlines, then the distinct national histories of Scotland, Wales, and England were fabrications.³⁶ Culture and traditions, Balfour argued, provided the “glue” that held national communities together. Irish inferiority was not based on biology. The Irish people simply did not have any distinct national identity or a culture suited to modernity.

MacNeill challenged this thinking by asserting the value and longevity of the Irish language. Only in his lifetime was Irish disappearing as a living tongue, and then mainly

³⁴ Quotes from MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 1.

³⁵ MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 3.

³⁶ Arthur James Balfour, *Nationality and Home Rule* (London: Longmans, Green and CO., 1913), 13-14.

as the result of catastrophic events. If language was the distinctive feature of Irishness, its accurate use and dissemination were paramount. The MacNeill archives contain much communication with the preeminent scholars of the day, trying to ensure the most accurate and comprehensive understanding of Irish and its connection to Irish history. For example, in 1904, the prominent philologist Dr. Kuno Meyer, wrote to MacNeill that “Nothing in my opinion is more needed than good editions of the bardic poems of the Middle Ages. If the O’Mulrenin bequest which you...offered to the school some time ago can be used for this purpose [translation]...I would set some of our best students...to work on them.”³⁷ MacNeill replied that he approved the “idea of publishing some of the medieval poetry, and I am sure some one of the students you name...would be able to provide a good edition....”³⁸ It is evident from much of MacNeill and Meyer’s correspondence that their priority was to allow students to learn Irish through the most rigorous study they could provide.

Ultimately, Eoin MacNeill intended to see the Irish language “firmly established in all branches of education and in all walks of life as a living language.”³⁹ Simply bringing the spoken Irish word to the forefront of people’s consciousness was not enough. He also wanted to ensure that students could write the language, a skill essential to the success of the Gaelic League. “The workers of that association...were from the first distinguished by the determination to treat Ireland as a LIVING tongue, its literature as the living expression of the mind of the race.” This included acknowledging regional differences in the tongue: “a sound basis for the future of cultivation of Irish will never be laid until at least the readers of Irish make up their minds to be thoroughly familiar

³⁷ MacNeill Papers, National Library of Ireland.

³⁸ MacNeill Papers, National Library of Ireland.

³⁹ Martin and Byrne, *Scholar Revolutionary*, 3.

with the leading peculiarities of the usage of the different provinces.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the ancient language, so nearly lost by the disasters of the 19th century, was an essential component to rescue Irish distinctiveness. The “most obvious and easily grasped test of nationalism is language, that most distinctive mark of a nation, embodying its history and its literature.”⁴¹

MacNeill was a linguist of importance, but he was also a historian. One of his most compelling arguments was his assertion that Ireland had long been a civilized nation, one that embodied a successful and uniquely Celtic form of governance. MacNeill proudly repudiated the misconception that the Celts were a primitive people awaiting civilization at the hands of a superior British overseer. Most people, historians included, implicitly equated civilization with a centralized government. MacNeill argued that this assessment contained its own bias. Central authority was merely an “instrument of civilisation,” not essential, and the ideas of “civilized” and “barbaric” were relative and subjective. MacNeill repudiated what he viewed as misguided notions, asserting that the “true function of the State in the Christian order is to subserve the civilisation of the people, not to dominate it; and the moral authority of the State is increased by its fidelity to this function and diminished by exceeding it or departing from it.”⁴²

What MacNeill saw as the most fundamental error in misunderstanding Celtic Ireland was the prevailing view of scholars and public alike that Ireland had been composed of multiple tribes or clans. This misconception was not based in solid evidence, but was a theory conceived by a subconscious belief that English rule in Ireland

⁴⁰ Quotes from Martin and Byrne, *Scholar Revolutionary*, 9.

⁴¹ MacNeill in: D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 15-16.

⁴² MacNeill in Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland*, 16.

could be justified by depreciating the organic Irish civilization. MacNeill dismissed this historical error as “moonshine,” but acknowledged that it might be the result of simple ignorance about Ireland and her history. Ancient Ireland was divided into multiple distinct states or districts and individual states were usually sublimated to one leader in a kind of “association” of districts. There eventually were five main groups of states called “*coiced*” which means “a fifth part.” MacNeill was frustrated by the lack of understanding among Irish historians of his day who misunderstood this notion of “*coiced*” to be a “tribal community,” or “clan system.” He postulated that the “modern figment” of a society based on the Clan System could have been based on the relatively unimportant Irish custom of naming territories after the family groups to which the leader belonged.⁴³ One example is the district Connacht, whose ancestors’ name was “Conn,” a dynastic family whose name was given to the entire fifth over which the kings of that state had ruled. Many, MacNeill wrote, believed that the term “tribe” was based on kinship, but while the fifths might have been named after ancestors of families, this did not mean that the historical political framework in Ireland was based on a familial tribal system. MacNeill was so successful in demolishing the faulty accounts of earlier scholars that “every student of Irish law must gratefully salute [his] memory for the invaluable service he performed in destroying the older picture of the Irish ‘clan’ as a legal unit and the Irish ‘tribe’ as based on common kinship and communal ownership.”⁴⁴

In his study of the origins of Irish law, MacNeill wanted to create a more accurate history of Ireland’s early government, both oral and written. While there was a rich oral tradition of law, there were also laws documented in writing well before the British came

⁴³ MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, 26, 92-93 and 44-50.

⁴⁴ Martin and Byrne, *Scholar Revolutionary*, 48.

to Ireland in the 12th century. MacNeill offered the story of Cenn Faelad, a scholar who began to meticulously copy Irish law into writing, as a historical case study titled “The Beginning of Written Irish Laws,” in *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*. Cenn Faelad was a young soldier wounded in the battle of Moira during the war between the king of Ireland and the king of Dalriada in 637. After he was wounded, Cenn Faelad was taken to a monastery, where he began to attend the three schools offered by the monks: the school of Irish learning, the Latin school, and the school of Irish law. He was very successful in his study of law, devoted hours to writing the law onto slates and tablets, and later copied his transcriptions into books. The implication of the story was that until the first half of the seventh century, the study of Irish law was purely oral. Cenn Faelad’s practice of learning by day and surreptitiously writing by night suggested that writing and recording law was an innovation of his lifetime. The idea that Irish laws had never been recorded before the British arrived was a misconception.

In 1852, the British Government appointed a group of commissioners to the enormous task of transcribing, translating, and publishing the ancient laws of Ireland. However, they were not experts to any degree in the history, government, or language of Ireland, and this resulted in “gravely defective” translations.⁴⁵ Through no fault of their own, the commissioners were unable to produce an accurate history or translation of Irish law. This spurred MacNeill’s conviction that without a thorough working knowledge of the ancient Irish language, it would be impossible to translate any ancient Irish text accurately.⁴⁶ Had this error not occurred, “we may charitably assume that [modern

⁴⁵ MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, 91-94 and 84-86.

⁴⁶ MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, 88-89.

investigators of Irish law] would not have come to Irish law as to a happy hunting ground for primitive big game.”⁴⁷

Many of MacNeill’s writings and lectures focus on the problem of the lost legal tract undecipherable because of faulty translation. These omissions in the record explained why Irish historians of MacNeill’s time could not trust the historians of old. The material previously published was incomplete in “even its main features and fundamentals, and it suggested that this branch of European history demanded the publication and study of every page of the laws of Ireland that still remained in manuscript.”⁴⁸ The unpublished materials included many of the writings by the Brehon lawyers who, as the story of Cenn Faelad showed, began documenting the customs of Ireland in the seventh and eighth centuries and described rulings regarding rights of kings and property law. These scholars became a “hereditary privileged group,” the “guardians and interpreters of the laws.”⁴⁹ Protected and preserved by their own class of experts, these customary traditions and principles constituted the governing processes of the Celts.

In *Nationality and Home Rule*, Balfour emphasized the divided nature of Irish law because of the island’s “tribal organization.”⁵⁰ MacNeill asserted that when historians looked at Irish laws cumulatively, the most noteworthy feature was that they were the laws of all the Irish. The law was not localized and it did not differ from region to region, but rather, it remained consistent nationally, applicable in all parts of the island. This body of the law was crucial to understanding the nationhood of Ireland. Written and enforced by the jurists and men of learning, early Irish law justified the view that the

⁴⁷ MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, 89.

⁴⁸ MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, 111.

⁴⁹ R.V. Comerford, *Inventing the Nation: Ireland*, ed. Keith Robbins (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.

⁵⁰ Balfour, *Nationality and Home Rule*, 13.

Celts formed a unified society with a country that belonged to all. This conception of Ireland as a united country, even during its ancient history, overturned dismissals of the time that the Irish were barbaric and politically divided. To clarify the idea of the Irish nation, MacNeill articulated a difference between Nationality and Nationalism.⁵¹ MacNeill argued that Nationality is a non-political sentiment based on a deep connection to laws and culture; it is unlike Nationalism which is a political ideology, based entirely on “state absolutism.”⁵² For MacNeill, the extraordinary and distinctive Irish Nationality was found in its form of governance.

As much as law and language, religion, especially Roman Catholicism, was inextricably linked to Irish history. MacNeill was raised in a Catholic family. An instructor from the Catholic girl’s school in Glenarm privately tutored him when he was eight, due to the lack of a Catholic boy’s school nearby. Later he attended the Jesuit Belvedere College in Dublin.⁵³ However, MacNeill, did not hesitate to criticize the authorities of his own church, especially their insistence on English as the language of Irish schooling.⁵⁴ In 1908, MacNeill emphasized in an article in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* that it was “the duty of Catholics to foster the [Irish] language through the schools.” MacNeill demanded instruction in the Irish language as part of a mandatory school curriculum.⁵⁵ In a statement that must have appealed to the clergy, MacNeill once said that “when we learn to speak Irish, we soon find that it is what we may call essential

⁵¹ MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, 53, 89-91.

⁵² MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, 18.

⁵³ Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill*, 5.

⁵⁴ Maume, “MacNeill, Eoin,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁵⁵ Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill*, 13, 14.

Irish to acknowledge God, His presence, and His help, even in our most trivial conversations.”⁵⁶

To explain the hold that Roman Catholicism had gained in Ireland, MacNeill pointed to traces of Christianity in Ireland from very early times. Even before St. Patrick there was evidence of not only individual Christians, but small Christian communities in Ireland.⁵⁷ Very recently, Donnchadh O Corrain, in the widely selling *Oxford History of Ireland*, edited by R.F. Foster, stated that “Ireland is indebted overwhelmingly to Britain” even for its Christianity, the most famous of British missionaries being St. Patrick.⁵⁸ MacNeill, in his work on the life of St. Patrick, presented a different interpretation. By Patrick’s own admission, his religious work was inspired by the “Call of the Irish” themselves, who were already responding to the spiritual appeals of the Christian message.⁵⁹ St. Patrick did not somehow transform an original Irish identity in a British direction, he simply added to the growth of Christian understanding throughout the nation.

Arthur Balfour chose to emphasize the developments in Irish religion that occurred as a result of the Protestant Reformation, when Irish faith became a malicious tool that distorted Ireland’s religious and national identity.⁶⁰ He wrote, “Unhappily it was impossible anywhere, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to exclude religion from

⁵⁶ K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity*. 2nd ed. (England: Pearson Education Limited, 1999), 181.

⁵⁷ MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 161.

⁵⁸ Donnchadh O Corrain, “Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland,” in *Irish The Oxford History of Ireland*, ed. R.F. Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 10.

⁵⁹ MacNeill, *Saint Patrick*, 58.

⁶⁰ There may have been feelings of resentment towards Irish Catholics from the English. The integration of the Church into everyday life, and indeed, even government, politics, and law, was radically different from the subordination of church to state to which the British were accustomed. In *England and Ireland Since 1800*, Patrick O’Farrell writes that “to the English mind, steeped in a tradition where the church was subject to the state, and where, by convention, parish clergy did not appear to intrude into the sphere of politics, the Irish situation – where bishops were active in political affairs on the national level, and priests to less active in their localities – seemed a gross disorder in the body politic,” pp. 135.

politics; and it was certainly impossible in Ireland.”⁶¹ At the heart of Irish spiritual identity lay the emotional response of a people alienated by religious wars and a foreign government, trying to maintain religious equilibrium through a turbulent history. The first modern, national political organizations in Ireland were inevitably allied with religion after the discriminatory Penal Laws against Catholics in the 18th century and Daniel O’Connell’s battle for Catholic Emancipation in the 1820’s. The Land Wars and Home Rule movement perpetuated the linkage between religion and politics. The process of British conquest forced the Irish to mix Catholicism and politics to their detriment, but it was too late to correct that historical development. The majority of the Irish were “convinced that the cause of Ireland was the cause of Roman Catholicism, and the majority of Englishmen convinced that the cause of Protestantism was the cause of Liberty.” Balfour asserted that because of this, everything Irish was tainted with an anti-British attitude.⁶²

MacNeill approached the effect of religion on Irish nationality in a different light. A country’s spiritual beliefs could help sustain a highly developed and intense nationality and pride that was neither exclusive nor discriminatory. It is interesting to note MacNeill’s references to Christianity as opposed to Catholicism in Irish history. While MacNeill referred to Ireland as a Christian nation, there is no mention in his works of Catholicism as an institution of the state. While historians have emphasized the involvement of Catholic bishops in education and politics, in *Phases of Irish History* and *Saint Patrick*, MacNeill avoided all discussion of a “Catholic” nation, and focused on the more general designation of a “Christian” nation. This appears as a conspicuous omission

⁶¹ Balfour, *Nationality and Home Rule*, 16.

⁶² Balfour, *Nationality and Home Rule*, 16-17.

of what is commonly seen as a fundamental tenant of Irish nationalism. While MacNeill argued that religion was crucial to the Irish nation, and that through an appreciation of culture and language, one acknowledged God, he only specified a Christian God. Even for MacNeill, a Catholic, it seems that his focus was on displaying the merits of Ireland's Christianity, not its Catholicism. MacNeill's work on the pre-Reformation history of the Irish people allowed him to avoid dealing in concrete ways with the Protestant-Catholic divisions that constituted the single greatest impediment to realizing an Irish national identity.

MacNeill argued that a sense of nationality appeared very early in Ireland, brought by the Gaels when they moved to the island from central Europe. The ancient connection between Ireland and her inhabitants was composed of language, law, and love for the land. As MacNeill points out, traditionally the first words spoken on Irish soil by a Gael "were an invocation addressed to Ireland herself"..."I entreat the land of Eire." MacNeill argued that this was the beginning of a clearly formed conception of one nation, "composed of diverse peoples, but made one by their clear affiliation to the land that bore them - the clearest and most concrete conception of nationality to be found in all antiquity."⁶³

Critics from Britain, like Balfour, had long argued differently. Balfour wrote that the conception of Irish nationality was a "complete delusion. The history on which it is based is imaginary history... [Ireland] has never been deprived of her national organization, for she never possessed one." Any success found in Irish law, literature, and culture was based on an English model. Even recently, revisionist historians like

⁶³ MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 97.

Roy Foster have asserted that not only Irish religion, but law, government, and culture were defined by outsiders.⁶⁴ However, it must be recognized that culture is shaped and defined by many forces. While Balfour did not agree that the Irish had a national identity, his sentiment regarding what constituted a country's national identity was almost identical to MacNeill's. In *Nationality and Home Rule*, Balfour wrote that

The sentiment of nationality is one of a group of such sentiments for which there is unfortunately no common name. Loyalty, whether to a country or a party, fidelity to a cause, to a national sovereign, to a tribal chief, to a church, to a race, to a creed or school of thought, are characteristic specimens of the class. They may be mistaken, they often are mistaken. Nevertheless they make human society possible; they do more, they make it noble. It is such sentiments which induce a man to sacrifice ease, and profit, and perhaps life itself, for something which wholly transcends his narrow personal interests. Therefore, whether mistaken or not, there is always in them an element of greatness.⁶⁵

MacNeill argued that the Irish *had* this 'sentiment of nationality,' defined by language, history, and traditions, something that no outsider had been able to eradicate.

Ultimately, MacNeill asserted, the Celtic people created a distinct national identity for themselves because they were able to borrow and mould ideas from other cultures with whom they came into contact. However, that "is true of every people that has developed and maintained a distinctive nationality."⁶⁶ In fact, this ability proved the existence of a nation and a highly distinct and intense nationality. MacNeill evoked the transformative power of every such unique nationality. In every manifestation of a unified nation there dwelt the "actuality or the potentiality of some great gift to the common good of mankind." He lauded the power of the nation for its ability to transcend wars between countries and clashing of empires, and held up the idea of the nation and its "wider patriotism" as an example of what is good in mankind. Ireland, he said, might not

⁶⁴ Foster, *The Oxford History of Ireland*, 12.

⁶⁵ Balfour, *Nationality and Home Rule*, 10.

⁶⁶ MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 226.

be a perfect nation, but it embodied a great deal of the magnificence of the national concept.⁶⁷ “You will not find anywhere in Europe...the definite and concrete sense of nationality - of country and people in one - which is the common expression of the Irish mind in that age.” He wrote that every Irish history was a history of all of Ireland; there were no merely tribal or clan histories. Every law belonged to Ireland as a whole, and every person belonged to Ireland as a nation. Ireland’s consciousness as a nation was not defined by fear and domination but by a devotion to the country and her people.⁶⁸

A century later Irish historians still see MacNeill as the founder of modern, professional Irish history. His accomplishments are numerous and profoundly affected Irish studies. He was a founder of the Gaelic League dedicated to the preservation of the Irish language, and his efforts had concrete impact when Irish became mandatory in the curriculum of Irish schools. MacNeill’s accomplishments in education demonstrated his devotion to ensure the vitality of Irish language and history, and he finally rose to the top of the educational hierarchy as the Minister of Education in the new Irish Free State. After he left the Irish Volunteers and his work in politics, MacNeill returned to teaching at the University College, Dublin where he resumed his writing. He continued in his work to preserve Irish history and language when he was appointed as the first chair of the Irish Historical Manuscript Commission, the first president of the Irish Historical Society, president of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and president of the Royal Irish Academy.

⁶⁷ MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 226-227.

⁶⁸ MacNeill, *Phases of Irish History*, 245-246.

Even the revisionist schools of Irish history born after the Second World War acknowledged MacNeill's expertise and professionalism. Historian John Hutchison wrote that

“In Ireland the ‘founder’ of modern Irish historiography, Eoin MacNeill[’s]...sophisticated and pioneering work on Ireland’s medieval Gaelic past, when vulgarized by non-academic historians such as Alice Green and conveyed in school textbooks, reinforced the mythologies of popular tradition that presented Ireland as an independent national and democratic civilisation that had fought for independence against the English invaders.”⁶⁹

R.D. Edwards also acknowledged the “profound impact” of MacNeill’s work on establishing a basis for “scientific...study of early Irish history, its laws and institutions.”⁷⁰ However, some revisionist historians like Roy Foster have lost MacNeill’s contributions in their effort to place Irish history in the broad context of the development of European peasant societies.⁷¹

While it is important to acknowledge Eoin MacNeill’s role in the academic field of ancient Irish history, the question remains why a study of Irish history, whether modern or ancient, would help an “everyday Irishman” or foreign scholars to understand the nineteenth and twentieth century Irish nationalism as Eoin MacNeill experienced it. He believed passionately in Ireland as a country and its right to be recognized as having a culture based on the positive, instead of the common conception that Irish life was founded entirely upon anti-British sentiment, or adoption of British ways.

⁶⁹ John Hutchison, “Irish Nationalism,” in *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*, eds. D. George Boyce and Alan O’Day (London: Routledge, 1996), 100. For more information about Alice Stopford Green, see S. Pařeta, “Green , Alice Sophia Amelia [Alice Stopford Green] (1847–1929),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33531>, accessed 17 Dec 2009].

⁷⁰ R.D. Edwards, “An Agenda for Irish History, 1978-2018,” in *Interpreting Irish History*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1994).

⁷¹ For a Brendan Bradshaw’s assessment of revisionist studies of Irish history see John Hutchison: “Irish Nationalism” in Boyce and O’Day, *The Making of Modern Irish History*, 106. In *Irish Historical Studies*, the “house journal” of the Irish historical profession, Bradshaw critiqued revisionist historians for “fundamentally distorting the understanding of the Irish past and failing in their duty as historians to sustain the capacity of the Irish people to build a better future.”

In 1904 Eoin MacNeill gave a lecture in University College, Dublin, entitled “Where does Irish History begin?” For anyone studying Irish nationalism, this question is vital. Does Irish national history begin with the “Gaelic Period,” the pre-Norman Ireland in the tenth century that is so often regarded as the custodian of the real Irish tradition? Or does relevant Irish history begin with the revolts of the Geraldines or the Gaelic chieftains in the sixteenth century?”⁷² Another option is that Irish nationalism is a new and modern movement beginning in the nineteenth century. Whatever choice, a historian finds themselves searching for answers in the ancient past, or trying to understand the complicated relationship between the Irish and their country in recent history, without the advantage of distance. What MacNeill emphasized was a constant theme throughout Irish history of the unique unity of the Irish people, whose culture and identity was entirely separate from the overarching state. He asserted that the nation was Christian, and not a nation of contrived Catholicism based on state doctrine. The Irish people might be peasants, but they were not a peasant nation. They were not defined by their status, their livelihood, or their economic condition. What MacNeill defined as being unique about the Irish was their purely “Irish” identity, separate from any external forces, and impervious to attempts to dominate the nation, with force, politics, or culture.

Despite MacNeill’s intensive work on Irish history and language, one of his unique characteristics is that he consciously avoided addressing the subject of religious, cultural, and political tension between Protestants and Catholics, a conflict that, for many, defines much of Ireland’s history throughout the several centuries. In defining Ireland as a “Christian” nation, MacNeill entirely avoided the question of whether Protestants could even be Irish, a concession that many Irish Catholics themselves were not willing to

⁷² Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland*, 15.

make. Additionally, MacNeill never concretely stated his opinion on political violence. Although he was the leader of the Irish Volunteers, he was disinclined to acknowledge his personal position on the use of force for political ends. MacNeill liked to refer to himself as a man of “moderate views,” and he confessed, “The appeal of the physical force party had always been limited.” However, he qualified this in his memoirs when he wrote, “personally, I was no doctrinaire, whether on behalf of physical force or against it.” MacNeill knew that if the Irish Volunteers would be used at any point as a “military force after the manner of ordinary armies, the Volunteers could effect very little.” In retrospect, MacNeill argued, “the operations of Easter Week 1916 were a political demonstration pure and simple, which never from the first had the slightest calculable chance of military success.”⁷³ MacNeill, though forceful in his assertions regarding language and culture, was unable to directly confront the problem of political violence in his own country.

Regardless of these omissions, MacNeill offered an entirely unique perspective on Irish identity. To face the volumes of criticism about the inferiority of the Irish and assert the importance of Irish culture as purely Irish was a bold step. In an imperial world, MacNeill argued that the importance of a nation was not defined by its use of force, or its ability to dominate others, but by a distinct ability to cultivate a society defined by culture and language. Eoin MacNeill devoted his life to studying and recovering Ireland’s history, and the vision of Ireland that MacNeill articulated was not only unique, it was revolutionary.

⁷³ MacNeill’s unpublished memoirs, MacNeill Papers, University College Dublin.

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