No Time For Babbling or Sitting Still

The Role of Women in National and Cultural Revivalism As Presented by Celtic Revival Relics

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Introduction

Much More Than Neopagan Priestesses – The Holistic Complexity of Celtic Women to Revivalist Authors

Celtic Revivalist authors from the 19th-20th centuries gave women multifaceted roles, often at the vanguard, sometimes as the defining force of the movement, or of a Nation itself. The sparks set by Celtic National and cultural revivalists caught flame and endured, taking the shape of contemporary Celtomania, which elevates Celtic womanhood to a mystical, nature-centric, hyper-spiritual level. The portrayal is usually viewed through a pantheistic, animistic or Neopagan lens. Poet Dr. Sharon Blackie, writing in an article titled *When Celtic Women Were God* in 2016, encapsulates modern notions:

> Once upon a time, the people of our Celtic nations knew what the indigenous people of other lands knew: that our fate is inseparable from the fate of the land we live on, and the fate of wider Earth. Once upon a time, Celtic women knew that we are the land, and the land is us. Once upon a time, we spoke with the moral and spiritual authority of the ancestors and the Otherworld. Once upon a time, before the coming of the Wasteland. Before the forces of the patriarchy systematically stripped us of that knowledge and of our power. Before the great patriarchal religions and the men who spoke for their misogynistic gods systematically rewrote our stories.'[1]

However, present notion does not match prior portrayals. Dr. Blackie, writing whilst *standing on the shoulders of giants* such as W.B Yates, Lady Morgan (Sydney Hall), Lady Augusta Hall and Fanny Parnell, oversimplifies, creating a motif that lacks the depth and complexity of the movement's founding writers. To them, women were dynamic, being *all things to all men*, agents of conserving Celtic culture, staunch defenders of both the Christian faith in its manifold sects and variations along with the mysteries of the Druids from the corridors of antiquity. They were the domestic governesses of their homes and outside the home; active, fierce public leaders promoting and defending language, folk attire, custom and dress. Politically radical, educated and engaged, the Celtic Woman demanded suffrage rights, beseeching their men to be strong, worthy patriots like unto themselves. They opposed the Elite Classes but, paradoxically, their heroines were themselves of royal, intellectual or elite stock. Moreover, it is the women of the Celtic Revival who were the primary literary example of what was different, unique, ancient, and curious. Celtic womanhood was the benchmark by which the

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[1] Dr. Sharon Blackie, *When (Celtic Women Were God)* (2025) <https://sharonblackie.substack.com/p/when-celtic-women-were-god> [accessed 3 January 2026].

culture with whom they shared the Isles in the Sea was measured. Far from mere pagan enchantresses or Faerie Queens, Celtic Women were portrayed as the complex transition and uncomfortable union between England and the Celts, between Modernity and the Old World.

This essay explores these portrayals by examining key texts from the Period. Fanny Parnell's call to action in *To My Fellow Women,* Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl,* a trailblazing contribution to the Novel as a literary category and lastly, Eisteddfod award winner Lady Augusta Hall's essay, whose conservatism and promotion of traditional roles for Welsh women provides a well-rounded picture of divergent portrayals within the movement, the sum of which provide a sharp contrast to Feminist or Neopagan portrayals as found in Blackie and other 20th-21st century writers.

A Call To Action - Outward

Fanny Parnell's – *To My Fellow Women*

Fanny Parnell was an Irish Nationalist who lived a short life of just above three decades (1848-1882) but made a weighty impact advocating for Irish Peasants against the corruption of 19th century Irish Landowners. Parnell had a deep passion for both Ireland and the working class. Essayist Ely Janis in *Petticoat Revolutionaries: Gender, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Irish Ladies' Land League in the United States* describes Parnell beseeching (from New Jersey in America, where she lived during the final years of her life) her kinsmen and kinswomen to rise up against oppression, at one point spending two months writing letters back to Ireland *'incessantly, day and night.'*[2]. Her writings reveal an anxiousness or worry that Farmers, male politicians and especially women were not doing more, not acting fast enough, to impact change. Part of the very Class with whom she warred, Parnell, a non-violent agitist[3] 'with the pen instead of the sword', Parnell viewed the role of women in the Irish National Revival as nurturing, soft caregivers, but also as activists:

> Fanny Parnell believed that "this Land League business because itis essentially a work of philanthropy and humanity." Her mother echoed her concerns, stating that "the characteristic of a virtuous woman is to raise her voice for those who are condemned to destruction." The belief in the necessity of providing for despondent and suffering Irish kinfolk placed
> the responsibility for action on Irish American women and justified
> their inclusion in male-dominated another important responsibility facing Irish American women.[4]

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[2] Ely M Janis, 'Petticoat Revolutionaries: Gender, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Irish Ladies' Land League in the United States', Journal of American Ethnic History, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2008), p. 11

[3] Ely M Janis, 'Petticoat Revolutionaries: Gender, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Irish Ladies' Land League in the United States', Journal of American Ethnic History, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2008), p. 10

[4] Ibid, p. 13

The prolific writer gives a call to action to Women of Ireland in her poem *To My Fellow Women,* written during the Irish land wars near the end of Parnell's life (she passed away from a heart attack at thirty-three). It was later published in 1909 in the Bean na hEireann (The Women of Ireland), a nationalist and feminist monthly magazine between 1908-1911.

To Parnell, the Irish Woman is noble, primal and full of powerful potential but has become idle or lost a sense of her own identity. The poem opens, and then continues, with a buildup of pedigree and position, followed by an encouragement to fulfill past glory.

> Oh last at the cross, and first at the grave,
> And first at the Rising, too;
> Is there nothing left for your hearts to feel,
> Or left for your hands to do?
> Have you lost your crown of the days of old,
> As the mates of noble men?
> Are you faint and fearful and witless now?
> Who were bold as the she-lions then.[5]

Parnell reminds her readership that the Lord selected women for the most elect stations in His inner circle, being first witnesses of the Resurrection. She then upbraids her kinswomen for being idle, bereft of additional important work, having abdicated the nobility that accompanies their womanhood. The stanza ends with an appeal to bravery, imploring boldness from her readers.

The Patriot Poet uses a strategy of appealing, almost universally, to Womanhood as a whole, drawing examples of priestesses, goddesses, warriors and mothers from a broad tent to include Scandinavia, Egypt, Israel and Greece. In this regard, the poem is intersectional and as much a piece for feminism in general as it is a rallying cry for the Irish in particular. When returning to her kinswomen, she writes:

> Have you heard of the warrior queens who shed
> On your country's dawn a glow?
> Of Scotia, and Eire and Maedb who flash
> From the shadows of long ago?—
> When the mothers of Erin fed their babes
> From the sword-point, bright and bare,
> And the Druidess flew in the battle's van
> By the burning torch's glare.[6]

Parnell's Celtic Woman is a warrior, a queen, and a mother. Absent is a call to abandon the traditional office of maternity, rather the poem, consistent with its author's politics, demands a transcendental role for Irish Women. The hints of "God, Family, and Country", which carry conservative notes, blend with eschewing submissiveness or keeping quiet in the home. Parnell's

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[5] Fanny Parnell, 'To My Fellow Women', *Bean nah Eireann*, (1909), p. 10
[6] Fanny Parnell, 'To My Fellow Women', *Bean nah Eireann*, (1909), p. 10

Celtic Woman loves God, loves Country, loves Family, and is willing to take the vanguard position on the frontlines:

> Oh women of Ireland, this is no time
> For babbling or sitting still;
> No time is it now to doubt and quail—
> There is holiest work to do—
> The harvest of Fate is ripe this day,
> And God and your country have need of you.[7]

If Fanny Parnell calls upon women to eschew complacency and engage the world outwardly, Lady Morgan's National Tale is a portrait of what happens when the world comes to Ireland.

A Call to Action – Inward and Preserve

Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* and Augusta Hall's Eisteddfod Essay

In *The Wild Irish Girl, A National Tale*, written by Sydney Owenson (later Lady Morgan) and published in 1806, the Lady of Inismore is unequivocally the archetype of Ireland, a personification of its culture. Glorvina is romance, mystery, beauty and the complex relationship with the English. The epistolary work of fiction is not only a treasured Celtic Relic from the Revivalist era but also important to Literature for its role in defining *the Novel* and for framing a new genre, The National Tale.

Unlike Parnell, Lady Morgan lived a long life spanning eighty years over which were formed deep *Anglo-Irish* connections in Dublin, in Shrewsbury and later in her life, in London. A prolific writer and poet, her style of writing was so influential that Thomas Moore, Ireland's *national bard*, adopted it in his own works. Morgan's sister, Lady Olivia Clarke, was a poet whose works centered around Irish and gender themes. Additionally, Morgan spent time in the household of John Hamilton, 1st Marquess of Abercorn, an Anglo-Irish politician.[8] From politics to literature, the interactions and course of Morgan's life made her well qualified to be a key contributor to the Celtic Revival.

In the same way that Fanny Parnell's contributions could be analyzed outside of Celtic Studies, Lady Morgan invented a formulaic approach to storytelling that is often critiqued apart from its subject matter. *The National Tale* is a storytelling mechanism that exploded within ten years of *The Wild Irish Girl's* release and has been repeated both in written and cinematic form for over two hundred years. The formula, now tested and applied, includes:

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[7] Fanny Parnell, 'To My Fellow Women', *Bean nah Eireann*, (1909), p. 11
[8] "Sydney, Lady Morgan", Wikipedia, Last Modified 29 April 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney,_Lady_Morgan> [accessed 17 January 2026]

- The Foreigner or Outsider's Journey – An English (later any Outsider from a seemingly superior or more civilized land) travels to Ireland, expecting to find a primitive or backwards land and people.
- Unexpected Romantic Encounter – The traveler, over the process of time and many adventures and mishaps, falls deeply in love with a local, who is wild and mysterious, yet surprisingly cultured.
- Awakening and Transformation – As the love develops and deepens, the Englishman or outsider begins to gather and appreciate a deep respect for the local customs, culture and people of Ireland (later any host people or location where the perception is that they are primitive, backwards or inferior)
- Another Suitor Who Is Not an Antagonist – There are no overt villains in this formula (where love is concerned), but a competing suitor for the main character is always present.
- Union and Moving to / becoming One with Ireland – The Englishman or visitor, in the end, leaves the trappings of London or some other large city, preferring the culture of Ireland.

This formula caught flame and was utilized twice by author Maria Edgeworth by 1812 and by Charles Robert Maturin, who published *The Wild Irish Boy*, a work that followed Morgan's pattern. The reader will readily recognize the formula in the 2010 romantic comedy *Leap Year* where the genders are reversed but the formula, two hundred years later, is still effectual. In *Leap Year*, a sophisticant from Massachusetts finds herself in a small Irish village. She is haughty and looks down upon the locals, including a bartender (who turns out to be a business owner and no commoner at all). Although betrothed to a very nice man (but engaged for the wrong motives), she instead falls deeply in love with her Gaelic host, leaving the city life fully, marrying him, and moving to Ireland.

Lady Morgan's original is the same, its plot likewise traces the life of Horatio, an English nobleman who has an estate in Ireland, is sent there begrudgingly as a punishment by his father. Expecting a primitive, inferior people and experience, he instead discovers a life and perspective altering romance in the person of Glorvina. The two gradually fall in love and, overcoming an alternative suitor (who turns out to be Horatio's very own father) arrange to marry, creating a clear allegorical union between England and Ireland, the ladder's beauty, mystery and culture forever challenging and changing the perspective of its would-be subjugator. Essayist Ina Ferris, writing an academic journal called *Nineteenth Century Literature* (1996) encourages the reader to see through the plot formula and see the *Revenge of a subdued and oppressed country upon her masters*[9] and the instrument the novelist uses to showcase the worth and grandeur of the Celt is the Gaelic noblewoman, Glorvina.

Glorvina is Ireland. First, she plays the harp, the musical symbol the Emerald Isle, with such perfection and mesmerizing power that it causes Horatio (who is England) to swoon:

[9] Ina Ferris, 'Narrating Cultural Encounter: Lady Morgan and the Irish National Tale', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1996), p. 288

> Was it the illusion of my now all-awakened fancy, or the professional exertions of the bard of Inismore? Oh, no! for the voice it symphonized, the low, wild, tremulous voice which sweetly sighed its soul of melody o'er the harp's responsive chords, was the voice of a woman![10]

Glorvina's chords touch Horatio's heart, changing it, and he sees the lady as the most elect of the hierarchy of spiritual beings, finding her to be as a seraph:

> while he listened to those strains which spoke at once to the heart of the father, the patriot, and the man—breathed from the chords of his country's emblem—breathed in the pathos of his country's music—breathed from the lips of his apparently inspired daughter! The white rising of her hands upon the harp the half-drawn veil that imperfectly discovered the countenance of a seraph; the moonlight that played round her fine form and partially touched her drapery with its silver beam—her attitude! her air! But how cold—how inanimate—how imperfect this description!
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> A trembling hand presented a cordial to my lips. I quaffed the philtre, and fixed my eyes on the face of my ministering angel. That angel was Glorvina![11].

Next, Morgan plays upon the Celtic theme of a mystical Christianity that combines elements of pagan antiquity with the faith. *The Wild Irish Girl* quickly establishes Glorvina as a staunch Catholic, and an Irish Catholic Priest is a main character. However, she both participates in pagan fertility rites and possesses scholarly authority when speaking on them:

> "It is certain," said the priest, "that the ancient Irish sacrificed on the first of May to Beal, or the Sun; and that day, even at this period, is called Beal."
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> "But," said Glorvina, "the first of May was not the only festival held sacred by the Irish to their tutelar deity; on the 24th of June they sacrificed to the Sun, to propitiate his influence in bringing the fruit to perfection; and to this day those lingering remains of heathen rites are performed with something of their ancient forms. 'Midsummer's Night,' as it is called, is with us a night of universal lumination—the whole country blazes: from the summit of every mountain, every hill, ascends the flame of the bonfire, while the

[10] Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl A National Tale,* Kindle Edition (New York: P.M Haverty, P.J Kennedy, Excelsior Catholic Publishing House, 1879), p. 46
[11] Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl A National Tale,* Kindle Edition (New York: P.M Haverty, P.J Kennedy, Excelsior Catholic Publishing House, 1879), pg. 46-47

> unconscious perpetuators of the heathen ceremony dance round the fire in circles, or holding torches to it made of straw, run with the burning brands wildly through the country with all the gay frenzy of so many Bacchantes. But though I adore our aspiring Beal with all my soul, I worship our popular deity Samhuin with all my heart—he is the god of the heart's close knitting socialities, for the domesticating month of November is sacred to him."[12]

This portrayal of a Celtic Woman as that of a Christian citing her worship, or at minimum, adoration and respect for, the Old Gods, is consistent with Celtic Revivalist literature:

> "For my part," said Glorvina, "I love all those old ceremonies which force us to be periodically happy, and look forward with no little impatience to the gay-hearted pleasures which to-morrow will bring in its train."[13]

Glorivina personifies the blending of paganism and Christianity and moreover, her rugged individualism and natural beauty combined with unknowable mystery personify Ireland itself as Horatio, bedazzled, declares "*Why, faith! I cannot well tell you what the Lady Glorvina is, for she is like nothing upon the face of God's creation but herself.*[14]

She is the Harp, she is the blend of the Old and New Religions, she has scholarly level intelligence, speaking as a peer to her male acquaintances, but she is also traditional and socially conservative, greatly preferring the Folk Costume of her People. Again, Glorvina breaks into a pedagogical dialogue:

> "Certainly they are," she replied, "and the colours which the Irish were celebrated for wearing and dyeing a thousand years back, are now most prevalent. In short, the ancient Irish, like the Israelites, were so attached to this many coloured costume, that it became the mark by which the different classes of the people were distinguished. Kings were limited to seven colours in their royal robes; and six were allowed the bards. What an idea does this give of the reverence paid to superior talent in other times by our forefathers! But that bright yellow you now behold so universally worn, has been in all ages their favourite hue.
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> "I am admiring," said I, carelessly, "the singular elegance of your costume: it is indeed to me a never failing source of wonder and admiration." "I am not sorry," she replied, "to avail myself of my father's prejudices in favour of our ancient national costume, which, with the exception of the drapery being made of modern

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[12] Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl A National Tale,* Kindle Edition (New York: P.M Haverty, P.J Kennedy, Excelsior Catholic Publishing House, 1879), pg. 125-126
[13] Ibid, p. 127
[14] Ibid, p. 36

> materials (on the antique models,) is absolutely drawn from the wardrobes of my great grand dames.[15]

Establishing an identity reinforced by traditional or Folk Costume is an essential Celtic Revivalist theme. The Bretons celebrated their coif and costume, the Irish and the Welsh emphasizing costumes of their own. Augusta Hall, the Baroness of Llanover. (1802-1896), was a radical defender of Welsh language and culture, and put forth the same love for Traditional Costume as her Irish counterpart. In her Eisteddfod essay, *The Prize Essay On The Advantages Resulting From The Preservation Of The Welsh Language, And The National Costume of Wales*, published in 1834, she writes:

> Having touched upon those points which we consider most important to support our opinion of the striking " advantages to be derived from the preservation of the language of Wales," we will pass on to the mention of " the advantages resulting from the preservation of the Costumes of the Principality, which of late years have fallen greatly into dis-use through the discouragement they have met with from the higher orders, who, nevertheless, at the present time are frequently known to lament this circumstance, and to regret and deprecate the introduction of foreign luxuries in articles of dress.[16]

The costumes themselves are, in some ways, secondary to a theme found in both Celtic Relics that might be missed if glanced over casually. The role of women, to Morgan and Hall, is to buy locally, to support products of high quality regardless of modern fashion or whim, and to advocate for economic Patriotism, paraded through costume. Glorvina expresses distaste for modern materials on ancient patterns[17] while Hall, who made the wearing of her vision of a Welsh Costume mandatory, goes further, writing:

> but of late years a false standard of respect-ability has been established, which has in a great many instances effected such a change of costume, as is utterly incompatible with a proper discharge of household and agricultural duties-What woman, dressed in the thin and comfortless materials, now so frequently substituted for the substantial produce of the Cambrian loom, is capable of properly discharging the duties of the dairy, or many of

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[15] Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl A National Tale,* Kindle Edition (New York: P.M Haverty, P.J Kennedy, Excelsior Catholic Publishing House, 1879), p. 86

[16] Hall Essay, pg. 9

[17] Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl A National Tale,* Kindle Edition (New York: P.M Haverty, P.J Kennedy, Excelsior Catholic Publishing House, 1879), p. 86

> the other necessary occupations which in every family, from the Peer to the Cottager, must entirely depend upon female exertions ? It is not only from the nature of their materials, but likewise from their make and form that the Welsh costumes are admirably adapted for active employments, and it is to the tyranny of fashion that their recent decline is to be attributed.[18]

Lady Hall scourges modern fashion, and its cheap material as an inhibitor to women executing their traditional gender roles within the home and on the farm, again differing from modern feminist or neopagan motifs in today's Celtomania. These Relics present a complex view and portrayal of women, very diverse but with a constant thread found in pleading Celtic Women to remain strong, and to act.

Parnel calls to action is for Celtic Women to go outward, and fight at the vanguard of justice. Lady Morgan's in an inward call, beseeching visitors or would be conquerors to see the beauty, mystery, intellectual command and nobility for Celtic women. Hall's sermon like fiery essay beseeches the Welsh to preserve the culture through language and the women through dress and deed. The calls to action differ but the three relics come into complete agreement that there is no time for babbling or sitting still for the Celtic Woman.

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[18] Augusta, Hall, *The Prize Essay On The Advantages Resulting From The Preservation Of The Welsh Language, And The National Costume of Wales*, (London: Longman Reese, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman; Cardiff: William Bird, 1836), p. 10

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