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Title of extract: **The Visionary Celtic Church**

Name of Author: **Sims-Williams, P**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable):

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable): **Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies Vol 11 1987**

Publisher: **Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic, University of Cambridge**

Pages scanned: **71 - 96**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Conceptualising the Celts CYCS7020**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning:

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Date authorised: 11.09.12

Moodle/Powerpoint

The Visionary Celt: The Construction of an Ethnic Preconception

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CHARLES James O'Donnell founded the O'Donnell lectures to encourage discussion of the relations between the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon peoples of the British Isles.¹ To a member of a Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic this seems a very worthwhile enterprise, and it is a great privilege to fulfil the terms of the O'Donnell bequest in the University of Edinburgh.² In some earlier O'Donnell lectures, given in the University of Oxford, I considered the historical sources for the relations between Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D.³ The present lecture makes a leap forward, following the example of another Edinburgh O'Donnell lecturer, Stuart Piggott, who took as his theme 'part of the history of the concept of Celts and Saxons as antithetical entities'. Professor Piggott explored 'the circumstances in which such ideas originated among antiquaries, historians and linguists between roughly the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries', and left off his story 'with the shadows of the Celtic Twilight closing in upon us'.⁴ We are now going to venture into those shadows. I hope to show that the nineteenth-century 'history of the concept of Celts and Saxons as antithetical entities' still has some relevance today and deserves to be discussed at university level, in accordance with the spirit of O'Donnell's will.

The central nineteenth-century figure, even in the Celtic countries themselves, is Matthew Arnold, who delivered his Oxford lectures on 'The Study of Celtic Literature' in 1865-66. As Frank O'Connor

¹The terms of O'Donnell's will are rather narrower; cf. *Angles and Britons: O'Donnell Lectures*, [edited by Henry Lewis] (Cardiff, 1963), p. v and passim; D. Ellis Evans, 'Celts and Germans', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29 (1981-82), 230-55 (p. 230). Some O'Donnell lecturers have been permitted to interpret them so broadly as to include any Celtic topic treated through the medium of English. ²This O'Donnell lecture was given on 17 April 1986. I should like to thank Professor and Mrs Gillies for their hospitality, and everyone who has made suggestions and encouraged me to publish it. ³'Gildas and the Anglo-Saxons', *CMCS*, 6 (Winter 1983), 1-30; 'The Settlement of England in Bede and the *Chronicle*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 12 (1983), 1-41. ⁴Stuart Piggott, *Celts, Saxons, and the Early Antiquaries* (Edinburgh, 1967), pp. 3 and 22.

has said, '*On the Study of Celtic Literature* is one of the really influential books of the nineteenth century, and we have to realize that it underlies a great deal of the early work of Yeats and his followers'.⁵ Arnold himself was greatly influenced by the celebrated essay on 'the poetry of the Celtic races', *La Poésie des races celtiques*, which Ernest Renan had published in Paris in 1854. The unity of what were now called the Celtic languages, though long since perceived by Lhuys and Leibniz, had only recently gained general acceptance, and Renan and Arnold were the first to present a wide European public with a synthetic, generalized picture of the various Celtic-speaking peoples and their literatures. Both were properly modest about their qualifications for the task; but their ignorance was an aid to generalization, and their picture of the Celts appealed at a more fundamental level than that of the niceties of scholarship. Their work, as René Galand, Malcolm Chapman, and others have shown, was founded upon a structural opposition between the Celts and the better-known European 'races'.⁶ Renan and Arnold set up the spiritual, impractical, rural, natural, and poetic Celtic peoples as the antithesis to materialism, 'Saxon' philistinism, utilitarianism, excessive rationalism, artificiality, industrial urbanization, and all the other failings of the modern European world. In this way they discovered a seemingly objective correlative for a number of tensions in nineteenth-century thought.

If we are tempted to smile at the crudity of this racial myth, it may be salutary to recall the heady 1960s and the role then played by the Orient, particularly India and Nepal, in the thought-world of Western seekers after 'alternatives', in the days when 'far out' became a term of admiration. In both cases geography was an important part of the myth. The geographical position of the modern Celtic-speaking peoples, on the western peripheries of Europe, was a historical explanation as well as a symbol for Renan, and all the more powerful for being both:

Jamais famille humaine n'a vécu plus isolée du monde et plus pure de tout mélange étranger. Resserrée par la conquête dans des îles et des

⁵*The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature* (London, 1967), pp. 159–60. For a sympathetic assessment see the O'Donnell Lecture by Rachel Bromwich, *Matthew Arnold and Celtic Literature: A Retrospect, 1865–1965* (Oxford, 1965). She emphasizes the novelty of comparative Celtic literature in Renan's and Arnold's day in 'The Celtic Literatures', in *Literature in Celtic Countries*, edited by J. E. Caerwyn Williams (Cardiff, 1971), pp. 25–57 (p. 41). ⁶cf. René M. Galand, *L'Âme celtique de Renan* (New Haven, 1959), p. 145; Malcolm Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture* (London, 1978), pp. 86, 94, 99, and 105–6. The immediate source of the dichotomy seems to be a contrast between Gauls and Germans drawn by French historians such as Amédée Thierry and Henri Martin; see *ibid.*, p. 82; Frederic E. Faverty, *Matthew Arnold the Ethnologist* (Evanston, 1951), pp. 23 and 123.

presqu'îles oubliées, elle a opposé une barrière infranchissable aux influences du dehors: elle a tout tiré d'elle-même, et n'a vécu que de son propre fonds. . . . La civilisation de Rome les atteignit à peine et ne laissa parmi eux que peu de traces. L'invasion germanique les refoula, mais ne les pénétra point. A l'heure qu'il est ils résistent encore à une invasion bien autrement dangereuse, celle de la civilisation moderne, si destructive des variétés locales et des types nationaux.

Never has a human family lived more apart from the world, and been purer from all alien admixture. Confined by conquest within forgotten islands and peninsulas, it has reared an impassable barrier against external influences; it has drawn all from itself; it has lived solely on its own capital. . . . Roman civilisation scarcely reached them, and left among them but few traces. The Teutonic invasion drove them back, but did not penetrate them. At the present hour they are still constant in resistance to an invasion dangerous in an altogether different way, — that of modern civilisation.⁷

While the writings of Renan and Arnold attracted interest in the Celtic literatures, they also distracted attention from the intrinsic significance and 'meaning' that the Celtic-speaking peoples might themselves traditionally have found in their cultures; they evaluated them in terms of the moral and spiritual lesson they might have, or have had, for metropolitan Europe. In Arnold's words, 'the Celtic genius of Wales or Ireland . . . cannot count appreciably now as a material power; but, perhaps, if it can get itself thoroughly known as an object of science, it may count for a good deal, — far more than we Saxons, most of us, imagine — as a spiritual power'.⁸ The foundation of the Celtic chair at Oxford was to be 'one of our angelic revenges on the Philistines' as well as 'a message of peace to Ireland'.⁹ Arnold had no intention or expectation that his ideas would lead to a literary revival, largely in English, in the Celtic countries themselves.¹⁰ He never anticipated that his own middle-class idealistic attack on English middle-class materialist values would be taken up by middle-class cultural nationalists seeking to de-Anglicize and, supposedly, to re-Celticize the Celtic countries them-

⁷*Oeuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, II, *Essais de morale et de critique*, 1859 [etc.], edited by Henriette Psichari (Paris, 1948), p. 255. As it was published early enough to have some influence in its own right on the Celtic Twilight, I use the English translation of William G. Hutchison: *The Poetry of the Celtic Races, and Other Studies by Ernest Renan* (London, 1896), pp. 4–5. It was perhaps to emphasize the separateness of the Celts that Renan cut out a discussion of the Celtic ancestry of the French from the published version of his essay (see Galand, pp. 85–86); cf. n. 6 above. ⁸*The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, III, *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, edited by R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1962), p. 298. ⁹*ibid.*, p. 386; cf. F. S. L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890–1939* (Oxford, 1979), p. 6. ¹⁰John V. Kelleher, 'Matthew Arnold and the Celtic Revival', in *Perspectives of Criticism*, edited by Harry Levin, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 20 (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), pp. 197–221.

selves.¹¹ But this is what happened. The Celticity of the virtues which Arnold praised, such as anti-materialism and spirituality, was accepted without question; the alleged Celtic faults such as impracticality were explained away historically or turned into hidden merits.¹² In the world of scholarship, the peripherality of the Celts came to be seen as a definite advantage as the idea gained currency that somehow, unlike the more central Teutonic and Latin peoples, the occidental Celts were privileged by special links with the oriental peripheries, in language, institutions, art, folklore, and varieties of Christianity.¹³

Before Renan and Arnold the antithesis between the Celts and other European races had generally been expressed to the Celts' disadvantage. 'When I was young', wrote Arnold, 'I was taught to think of Celt as separated by an impassable gulf from Teuton; my father, in particular, was never weary of contrasting them'.¹⁴ Arnold's stated aim, like that of O'Donnell, was to bridge this gulf. Nevertheless, since his attempt to do so involved attributing much that is admirable in non-Celtic literature and civilization to Celtic influences and substrata — and in this O'Donnell followed him — the import of his lectures on 'The Study of Celtic Literature' was to reverse the traditional racial polarity in the Celts' favour, not to bridge it. The Celtic/non-Celtic antithesis itself remained intact, and is still very much alive on the fringes of the academic world and in the subconscious of scholars.

Many examples may be found in *The Celtic Consciousness*, the proceedings of a 'Symposium on the Celtic Consciousness' held in the University of Toronto in 1978, which 'lasted for weeks and played

¹¹cf. Seamus Deane, 'Edmund Burke and the Ideology of Irish Liberalism', in *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, edited by Richard Kearney (Dublin, 1985), pp. 141–56 and 337–38 (p. 153); Elizabeth Cullingford, 'The Unknown Thought of W. B. Yeats', *ibid.*, pp. 226–43 and 343–45 (pp. 229 and 240). ¹²Kelleher, p. 212. ¹³To cite only two recent examples: Myles Dillon, *Celt and Hindu*, Osborn Bergin Memorial Lecture, 3 (Dublin, 1973); Robert K. Ritner, 'Egyptians in Ireland: A Question of Coptic Peregrinations', *Rice University Studies*, 62, no. 2 (Spring 1976), 65–87. Cf. n. 45 below. Joseph Raftery, 'Ex Oriente . . .', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 95 (1965), 193–204, is a spirited attack on assumptions about Coptic influence. Hamish Robertson, in his provocative 'Studies in Carmichael's Carmina Gadelica' (*Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 12 (1971–76), 220–65), speaks of 'that journey in the imagination to India which is still the pastime of Celtic scholars who follow the theory of the mutual identity of the outer fringes of Indo-European expansion' (p. 240). The oriental chapter in the history of Celtic scholarship deserves more detailed investigation. James Cowles Prichard's scholarly *The Eastern Origin of the Celtic Nations* (Oxford, 1831) is possibly important here. ¹⁴Arnold, iii, 299–300, cf. pp. 333, 497–98, and 500–1; and Faverty, pp. 117–18. For the earlier history of the Germanic/Celtic distinction see Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal, 1982); Piggott, *Celts, Saxons, and the Early Antiquaries*; Victor Tourneur, *Esquisse d'une histoire des études celtiques* (Liège, 1905); Evans, 'Celts and Germans'; L. P. Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Bridgeport, 1968).

to full houses in the largest auditoria on campus'.¹⁵ We are told that 'The Celt is an original European who has never excelled at most of the things for which European civilization is renowned: the evolution of the state, political and economic refinement, and organized religion. In the beginning of Celtic racial life, its collective spirit was a dominant force in Europe, with Druidic mystery schools at the core of its existence' (p. 589). 'The Celtic soul reaches back into the distant past of a golden civilization in tune with the earth and the rhythms of the universe. This folk soul was the channel for ageless, eternal wisdom. . . ' (p. 593). 'What is essential to the Celtic consciousness is the spirit of being an exile on this earth and of being in constant search for the Blessed Isles or the Holy Grail. . . . It's difficult for us to take "reality" very seriously and to believe that the world is made out of matter, a substance which can only be described by weighing, measuring, and calculating. . . . For a Celt the world is made out of music, and if he's not listening very hard to the engineer or the stockbroker, it's because he's hearing a different kind of music from the trees or the wind' (p. 597). History is forced into the same antithetical mould — 'The Celtic church was decentralized, shamanistic, and simple; the Church of Rome was centralized, hierarchical, complex, and worldly' (p. 599) — and peripherality is important: 'To understand the Celtic consciousness, the peripheries of the Indo-European world must be touched, and points of contact between East and West probed' (p. xii).

The Celtic Consciousness was chosen by the American Library Association as Outstanding Academic Book of the Year in the United States, and was published in Edinburgh in 1982 with a subsidy from the Scottish Arts Council. More recent, and more up-market, is Richard Kearney's *The Irish Mind*, published in Dublin in 1985. A central figure here is John Scottus Eriugena, whose theories 'transgressed the orthodox mainstream of "Roman realism," reaching instead from the western periphery of his native culture to the eastern periphery of oriental mysticism'.¹⁶ Kearney hypothesizes that 'from the earliest times, the Irish mind remained free, in significant measure, of the linear, centralizing logic of the Graeco-Roman culture which dominated most of western Europe', that 'the Irish intellectual tradition(s) represent something of a counter-movement to the mainstream of hegemonic rationalism which Jacques Derrida has termed "logocentrism"', that 'in contradistinction to the orthodox dualistic logic of *either/or*, the Irish mind may be seen to

¹⁵*The Celtic Consciousness*, edited by Robert O'Driscoll (Portlaoise and Edinburgh, 1982), p. x. (A slightly different Canadian first edition was published in 1981.) ¹⁶*The Irish Mind*, edited by Kearney (n. 11 above), p. 18; cf. p. 28. My remarks relate to the editor's introduction and to the overall plan of the book (which ranges from megalithic to modern thought), not to the individual contributions.

favour a more dialectical logic of *both/and*: an intellectual ability to hold the traditional oppositions of classical reason together in creative confluence' (p. 9), and that '*decentredness, double-vision, exile, and so on*' are 'common, if fluctuating, characteristics of the Irish mind' (p. 14). Kearney seems to arrive at these dichotomies partly by treating Greek philosophy, which is distinguished by its uniqueness,¹⁷ as if it were the totality of non-Celtic European thought, and partly by characterizing only the Irish mind on the basis of evidence from poets as well as philosophers (pp. 14 and 28). This circular argument arrives at yet another mutation of Arnold's antithesis, now sanitized in terms of 'culture' rather than 'race'.

The ability of racial antitheses to survive even the reversal of their polarity is remarkable. One example, discussed by Professor Piggott, is the oscillation between 'hard' and 'soft' primitivism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English accounts of the Ancient Britons, who are portrayed variously as Noble Savages and as Savages *tout court*.¹⁸ Another example is the change in the English characterization of the Irish in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In 1066 Ireland could still be regarded as an 'island of saints', following the lead given by Bede, who had used the holy, pacific Irish as a stick with which to beat the heretical, perfidious Welsh; yet by the twelfth century it was seen, equally one-sidedly, as an 'island of barbarians', reflecting the dialectic of military and ecclesiastical imperialism.¹⁹ In both cases the characterizations of the Ancient Britons and the Irish were reversed, but their essential quality of 'otherness', of abnormality, survived. 'Otherness' is the key to *The Celtic Consciousness* and *The Irish Mind*.

The Celts are, of course, only 'abnormal' and 'peripheral' in relation to other peoples who define themselves as normal and central. Most Celtic/non-Celtic antitheses, whether hostile or favourable to the Celt, have been formulated and re-formulated outside the Celtic-speaking world, in the context of extra-Celtic intellectual debates, in 'centres' in relation to which the Celtic-speaking peoples appear geographically peripheral and culturally abnormal. The social anthropologist Malcolm Chapman, commenting on modern labellings of the Scottish Highlander as, on the one hand, 'barbarous' and, on the other, 'spiritual and psychic', acutely remarks that 'different as these statements are, it can nevertheless be argued that they are statements of the same order, in that both owe their organising

¹⁷As a contributor rightly remarks, in another context, of the Greek achievement (Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Early Irish Ideology and the Concept of Unity', *ibid.*, pp. 56-78 and 323 (p. 60)). ¹⁸See Piggott, *Celts, Saxons, and the Early Antiquaries*. ¹⁹See Denis Bethell, 'English Monks and Irish Reform in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', *Historical Studies*, 8 (1971), 111-35 (pp. 125-26); T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Bede, the Irish and the Britons', *Celtica*, 15 (1983), 42-52; Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales, 1146-1223* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 16, 34-45, and 169-70.

rationality to the discourse of the dominant English-speaking majority'.²⁰ As Chapman concedes, however, echoing René Galand, the Celts themselves have often been ready to see their own reflection in the Celtic racial myths offered them, and to dance to their tunes.²¹ Indeed, I would go further and maintain that such Celtic racial myths are to a considerable extent the product of willing conspiracies between non-Celts and Celts, particularly Celts living in exile and interpreting their people to a foreign audience, with varying degrees of sincerity; a list of such Celtic 'conspirators' might include Geoffrey of Monmouth, Gerald of Wales, James Macpherson, Iolo Morganwg, Hersart de la Villemarqué, Ernest Renan, Alexander Carmichael, and even David Lloyd George playing up to the role of 'Welsh wizard' in English politics. According to Professor Tierney, collaboration between Celt and non-Celt can be seen already in the work of the first great ethnographer to describe the Celts, Posidonius in the second century B.C.; he argues that Posidonius relied on informants when describing the religious life of the Celts, and that in his account of the druids 'the will of the informer seems . . . to have corresponded with the will of the listener and produced an exaggerated account'.²²

In other words, racial stereotypes of the Celts are not solely invented and maintained by non-Celts in an imperialist context, important though this context has often been. A shared sense of Celtic 'otherness' can be exploited by Celtic individuals and groups working within, or against, the non-Celtic establishment, so it is not surprising that some Celts should have an interest in maintaining it. Gerald of Wales has an anecdote to this effect. Henry II sent a knight with a Welsh priest to reconnoitre the Welsh stronghold at Dinefwr and report back:

Presbyter autem, monitus ut per viam meliorem ad castrum et faciliorem militi praeberet iter, per magis difficiles et inaccessibiles aditus ipsum ex industria circumduxit. Et ubicunque per saltus herbosos transitum faciebant, cum intueuntium admiratione presbyter herbam pascebatur; asserens accolas et indigenas herbis et radicibus, ingruente inedia, vivere et vesci solere. Ad regem itaque milite reverso, cunctisque relatis quae vel digna relatu viderat vel audierat; terram scilicet inhabitabilem, terram

²⁰Chapman, *Gaelic Vision*, p. 17; cf. p. 18, and Malcolm Chapman, '“Semantics” and the “Celt”', in *Semantic Anthropology*, edited by David Parkin, Association of Social Anthropologists Monographs, 22 (London, 1982), pp. 123-43 (p. 127). ²¹Chapman, *Gaelic Vision*, pp. 28, 102, and 192; Galand, p. 153. For example, Prys Morgan notes that soon after Gray published *The Bard* in 1757 'the Welsh themselves began to believe Gray's picture' ('From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period', in *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 43-100 (p. 82)). On Gray see p. 94 below. ²²J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60, Section C, no. 5 (1960), 189-275 (p. 215).

inviām et inaccessibilem, nullique genti nisi bestiali et bestiarum more viventi victui necessarium.

This priest was told to lead the knight by the easiest route and to make his journey as pleasant as possible. Instead he made a point of taking him along the most difficult and inaccessible trackways. Whenever they passed through lush woodlands, to the great astonishment of all present, he plucked a handful of grass and ate it, thus giving the impression that in time of need the local inhabitants lived on roots and grasses. The knight went back to the King and reported everything worth mentioning that he had seen and heard. The district was quite uninhabitable, he said, inaccessible and virtually without roads, providing sustenance only for a bestial race of people, who were content to live there like animals.²³

Of course, this chimed in with the Norman stereotype of Wales and the Welsh, and the king decided not to attack!

In this lecture I want to concentrate on a particular racial stereotype, the Visionary Celt. I use this as shorthand for the conception of the Celt as an abnormally visionary or imaginative being whose mind is fixed to an unusual degree on the spiritual, the occult, or the ideal. The longevity of this image can be judged from the fact that in the very first paragraph of *The Irish Mind* Kearney feels it necessary to attack the 'cliché that this island was inhabited by irrational dreamers of dreams'.

The quest for the Visionary Celt leads us in the first place to Renan's 1854 essay, *La Poésie des races celtiques*. According to Renan, 'la race celtique', like Macsen in the medieval Welsh tale,

s'est fatiguée à prendre ses songes pour des réalités et à courir après ses splendides visions. L'élément essentiel de la vie poétique du Celte, c'est l'aventure, c'est-à-dire la poursuite de l'inconnu, une course sans fin après l'objet toujours fuyant du désir. Voilà ce que saint Brandan rêvait au delà des mers, voilà ce que Pérédur cherchait dans sa chevalerie mystique, voilà ce que le chevalier Owenn demandait à ses pérégrinations souter-raines. Cette race veut l'infini; elle en a soif, elle le poursuit à tout prix, au delà de la tombe, au delà de l'enfer. . . . L'instinct le plus profond peut-être des peuples celtiques, c'est le désir de pénétrer l'inconnu. En face de la mer, ils veulent savoir ce qui se trouve au delà; ils rêvent la terre de promesse. En face de l'inconnu de la tombe, ils rêvent ce grand voyage qui, sous la plume de Dante, est arrivé à une popularité si universelle.

²³*Itinerarium Cambriae*, 1.10, edited by James F. Dimock, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, vi, Rolls Series (London, 1868), pp. 81–82; *Gerald of Wales: The Journey through Wales and The Description of Wales*, translated by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 140.

The Celtic race . . . has worn itself out in taking dreams for realities, and in pursuing its splendid visions. The essential element in the Celt's poetic life is the *adventure* — that is to say, the pursuit of the unknown, an endless quest after an object ever flying from desire. It was of this that St. Brandan dreamed, that Peredur sought with his mystic chivalry, that Knight Owen asked of his subterranean journeyings. This race desires the infinite, it thirsts for it, and pursues it at all costs, beyond the tomb, beyond hell itself. . . . Perhaps the profoundest instinct of the Celtic peoples is their desire to penetrate the unknown. With the *sea* before them, they wish to know what lies beyond; they dream of a Promised Land. In the face of the unknown that lies beyond the tomb, they dream of that great journey which the pen of Dante has celebrated.²⁴

Such ideas had barely been hinted at before. Early Ireland had long been portrayed as an island of saints and scholars,²⁵ and in the 1840s Thomas Davis, imbued with German ideas about nationality, had invoked, as complementary Irish national qualities, 'the cloudy and lightning genius of the Gael', which sounds Ossianic, alongside 'the placid strength of the Sasanach' and 'the marshalling insight of the Norman'.²⁶ Yet Renan undoubtedly gave the nineteenth century something new. As I hope to show, he was really endowing the entire 'Celtic race' with the mentality of a Romantic hero, but his citation of medieval texts — here the Hiberno-Latin *Voyage of St Brendan*, Welsh *Peredur*, and Anglo-Latin *Purgatory of St Patrick* — lent his portrayal an air of authenticity, as well as an irresistible vividness. Renan's image of the Celt was taken up and popularized by Arnold,²⁷ and later by Yeats, who added the saving gloss that the 'dreams' mistaken for 'realities' were perhaps essences as opposed to accidents.²⁸ Arnold (like Yeats) is more vague than Renan, perhaps because of his pointed avoidance of the subject of Celtic Christianity, but nevertheless conveyed the essential message that 'spirituality' is a characteristic of the 'airy and unsubstantial' Celtic 'genius', which, in Henri Martin's celebrated phrase, was 'always ready to react against the despotism of fact' (*toujours prête à réagir contre le despotisme du fait*).²⁹

²⁴Renan, II, 258–59 and 296; translation by Hutchison, pp. 9 and 53. ²⁵Lyons, p. 11; Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: A Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780–1980* (London, 1983), pp. 5–6. ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 110. ²⁷Arnold mentions Renan's 'beautiful essay' only once (III, 342–43), not revealing his full debt; cf. Super's notes, pp. 405, 491, and 494–95; Faverty, pp. 120–21 and 218; J. W. Angell, 'Matthew Arnold's Indebtedness to Renan's *Essais de morale et de critique*', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 14 (1934), 714–33. Yeats is similarly reticent about his debt to Arnold; see Kelleher, p. 204. The differences between these three writers lie beyond the scope of this paper. ²⁸'The Celtic Element in Literature' (1897), in W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), p. 182. Arnold and Yeats both pass over Renan's remark about Celts seeking their illusions in drunkenness. ²⁹Arnold, III, 344, 351, and 507; cf. Faverty, pp. 134 and 142; Kelleher, p. 210; Chapman, *Gaelic Vision*, p. 82; Cullingford, pp. 229 and 241.

The Celtic-speaking peoples have had their share of visionaries.³⁰ Yet, to medievalists subservient, like myself, to the despotism of fact, the notion that they were peculiarly visionary is absurd, being supported neither by modern surveys of medieval visionaries³¹ nor by the medieval collections of visions by Otloh of St Emmeram, Peter Damian, Peter the Venerable, Peter of Cornwall, Caesarius of Heisterbach, and others.³² Renan makes a more specific claim, however, and cites earlier scholars in support. The medieval idea of travels to the Christian otherworld is, he says, 'evidently' Celtic.³³ In words later echoed approvingly by Yeats, he claims that

it cannot be doubted for a moment, after the able researches of Messrs. Ozanam, Labitte, and Wright, that to the number of poetical themes which Europe owes to the genius of the Celts, is to be added the framework of the Divine Comedy.³⁴

On investigation, I was astonished to find that these three scholars were very far from supporting Renan's conclusion. Charles Labitte in his learned essay on 'The *Divine Comedy* before Dante' had described the vision genre as 'long popular' and 'universally disseminated'.³⁵ Similarly, Frédéric Ozanam in his essay on 'The Poetic Sources of the *Divine Comedy*' had maintained that 'all the Catholic centuries contributed to Dante's work', for 'all the poetry of the Middle Ages was full of spectacles of Eternity';³⁶ indeed, the contri-

³⁰I intend discussing the earliest Irish and Anglo-Saxon visions of heaven and hell elsewhere. As J. E. Caerwyn Williams notes, 'the Welsh Church did not manifest any special interest' in such visions: 'Medieval Welsh Religious Prose', in *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Celtic Studies, 1963* (Cardiff, 1966), pp. 65–97 (p. 82); the evidence bearing on the matter is late medieval, however. ³¹C. J. Holdsworth, 'Visions and Visionaries in the Middle Ages', *History*, new series, 48 (1963), 141–53; Peter Dinzelbacher, 'Die Visionen des Mittelalters: Ein geschichtlicher Umriss', *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 30 (1978), 116–28; idem, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1981); Michel Aubrun, 'Caractères et portée religieuse et sociale des "Visiones" en Occident du VI^e au XI^e siècle', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 23 (1980), 109–30. ³²For bibliographical references to these collections see Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1984), pp. 372, 396, nn. 1 and 5, and 414, n. 28; Michael Lapidge and Richard Sharpe, *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature, 400–1200* (Dublin, 1985), no. 80. ³³Renan, II, 298; translated by Hutchison, p. 56. ³⁴On ne saurait douter du moins, après les belles recherches de MM. Ozanam, Ch. Labitte, Th. Wright, qu'au nombre des thèmes poétiques dont l'Europe est redevable au génie des Celtes il faut compter le cadre de la *Divine Comédie*, Renan, II, 299; translated by Hutchison, p. 57. Cf. Yeats, 'Celtic Element in Literature', p. 185. ³⁵La Divine Comédie avant Dante', *Revue des deux mondes*, 31 (1842), 704–42 (p. 741: 'long-temps populaire', 'universellement répandue'). ³⁶A. F. Ozanam, 'Des Sources poétiques de la Divine Comédie', in his *Oeuvres complètes*, v, *Les Poètes franciscains en Italie au treizième siècle* (Paris, 1855), pp. 351–469: 'tous les siècles catholiques apportaient leur offrande à son oeuvre' (p. 433), 'toute la poésie du moyen âge était... pleine des spectacles de l'Éternité' (p. 380). See also his *Dante et la philosophie catholique au treizième siècle* (Paris, 1839), pp. 70–71 and 325–55.

bution of the British Isles seemed less important to him than that of Germany.³⁷ Only Thomas Wright's book focused on the British Isles, and this was because its organizing theme was the Irish place of pilgrimage known as St Patrick's Purgatory: its title is *St. Patrick's Purgatory: An Essay on the Legends of Purgatory, Hell, and Paradise, current during the Middle Ages* (London, 1844). Even so, the racial stereotype of the Visionary Celt is absent from Wright's book, which includes the suggestive idea that early legends about purgatory got attached to Ireland because 'that island was regarded as being situated in the extreme west, the land of the shades' (p. 129) — an idea which (if developed) would seem to take ultimate responsibility for these legends away from the Irish themselves. Wright's main preoccupation, however, is the aggressively Protestant thesis that 'purgatory legends' were typical of Roman Catholic 'superstition' — hence their prominence and survival in Ireland (pp. vii–viii) — and that they derived to an unhealthy degree from north-west European native paganism, which he illustrated chiefly from Norse material.³⁸ Renan, with a very different perspective, indulgent to both 'superstition' and paganism, at least in their proper place on the margins of the rational world,³⁹ reused the same material, saying, with some exaggeration, that 'the learned Mr. Wright very justly observes that nearly all the descriptions of Purgatory come from Irishmen, or from Anglo-Saxons who have resided in Ireland, such as St. Fursey, Tundale, the Northumbrian Drythelm, and Knight Owen'.⁴⁰ Wright himself had not gone so far in implying a priority for the Irish over the English — this was incompatible with the contribution he posited from Germanic mythology. In Renan, however, any Germanic contribution drops out of view in favour of a 'wholly Celtic' interpretation of the medieval accounts of visits to heaven and hell,⁴¹ an interpretation that has appealed to scholars and popular writers ever since. Renan also ignores Wright's view that some popular medieval ideas about the geography of the Christian otherworld 'derived from some of the sectarians of the eastern church' (pp. 25 and 27). This appeal to the Orient struck more of a chord with subsequent scholarship, and could in fact quite easily be combined with Renan's position, especially as the idea became fashionable that the early Celtic church had special links with the Coptic church; as a single

³⁷'Des Sources poétiques', pp. 391 and 401–4. ³⁸Such as the Eddaic *Solarliod* (*St. Patrick's Purgatory*, pp. 5–6 and 129). ³⁹Renan, II, 300; translated by Hutchison, pp. 58–59. Cf. Galand, p. 121; Ozanam, 'Des Sources poétiques', p. 370, n. 1 (on Wright); H. W. Wardman, *Ernest Renan: A Critical Biography* (London, 1964), p. 54. ⁴⁰Le savant M. Th. Wright fait observer avec raison que presque toutes les relations du purgatoire viennent d'Irlandais ou d'Anglo-Saxons qui ont résidé en Irlande, tels que saint Fursy, Tundale, le Northumbrien Driethelm, le chevalier Owenn', Renan, II, 298; translated by Hutchison, p. 56. ⁴¹ibid. Contrast Wright, pp. 5, n., and 13.

example, I quote E. W. Watson's essay on 'Palladius and Egyptian Monasticism':

The vivid imagination of Egyptian ascetics . . . has the honour of introducing into Christian literature the notion of journeys into the realms of the dead. Their rudimentary visions are the germ of the whole splendid range of Keltic imaginings, from the Purgatory of St. Patrick and the Penitence of Tundal down to the Sleeping Bard, as well as of the supreme example in the *Divina Commedia*.⁴²

Why did Renan misrepresent the findings of earlier scholars so as to exaggerate the Celtic contribution to medieval Otherworld literature, and why was he believed? Why did the appeal of the Orient remain so alluring for subsequent scholarship, yet his minimization of any Germanic contribution find favour so easily — less than a century after the publication of Thomas Gray's *The Descent of Odin (Vegtamskviða)*?⁴³ The answers lie in ideology. As we have seen, Renan, like Arnold, privileged the Celts over the Germanic and other western European races in imagination, otherworldliness, and spirituality. For Renan, the physical journey from the vulgar landscape of Normandy into the melancholy (indeed, Ossianic) terrain of Brittany, from England into Wales, from the Lowlands into the Highlands of Scotland, was also a mental and spiritual journey:

Il semble que l'on entre dans les couches souterraines d'un autre âge, et l'on ressent quelque chose des impressions que Dante nous fait éprouver quand il nous conduit d'un cercle à un autre de son enfer.

It seems like entering on the subterranean strata of another world (*sic*), and one experiences in some measure the impression given us by Dante, when he leads us from one circle of his Inferno to another.⁴⁴

The simile is seductive; if Celtia is such another world, would we not expect its natives to be attuned to the Otherworld? Physical, material peripherality is seen as the correlative of spiritual 'superiority' or 'depth' (to vary the spatial metaphor). We can see now why scholars have remained so attracted by resemblances between the

⁴²*Church Quarterly Review*, 64 (1907), 105–28 (p. 125). The Welsh *Bardd Cwsc* derives ultimately from Spanish, and on the *Purgatory of St Patrick* see n. 71 below. ⁴³In 1758 Gray advised Mason, the author of *Caractacus*, 'that (in a time of dearth) I would borrow from the Edda, without entering too minutely on particulars' (quoted by Piggott, p. 18, with other examples of the closeness of Celtic and Germanic in the eighteenth-century imagination); see also Edward D. Snyder, *The Celtic Revival in English Literature, 1760–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1923), pp. 9–12, 43 and n. 1, 53, n. 1, 127, 138, 182, 185, and 192. ⁴⁴Renan, II, 252; translated by Hutchison, p. 2. Cf. Galand, pp. 88–89 and 137–38.

Celtic and Eastern churches (with any direct influence perhaps skirting Europe via Spain),⁴⁵ or between Irish and Indian mythology.

Human experience teaches that physical pilgrimages, whether to Rome or Kathmandu, can end in spiritual disillusionment. As the Old Irish poet says, 'Travel to Rome: much labour, little profit; the King whom you seek here, unless you bring Him with you, you will not find Him'.⁴⁶ The Celtic pilgrim à la Renan or Arnold cannot be disillusioned, however; if his quest is disappointed, that is because he has not found the 'real' Celt, who, as a survivor of a primitive, poetic, pre-rationalistic stage of human development, is by definition increasingly elusive. His 'divine tones', says Renan, are 'expiring on the horizon before the growing tumult of uniform civilisation'.⁴⁷ Arnold, though disappointed by a 'lifeless' eisteddfod at Llandudno, was similarly undeterred, for the essence of the Celts was to be found in their (medieval) literature,⁴⁸ and there it was easy to stress their extraordinary 'spirituality', partly because of a bias in that direction in the available selection of medieval Celtic literature, as we shall see, and partly because of the prevailing prejudice against medieval Germanic literature among modern Celtic apologists, who had reacted against the way in which Gray and lesser English writers exploited Germanic and Celtic sources as if they were interchangeable. Hugh Blair, for example, had contrasted Celtic 'delicacy of sentiment' and 'Gothic' barbarism on the basis of an unfair comparison of Macpherson's eighteenth-century 'translation' of Ossian with Saxo Grammaticus' rendering of an Old Norse poem, while Iolo Morganwg had surmised that 'the British Bardic Mythology' (which he largely invented) 'seems to me far more rational, sublime, and congenial to Human Nature, than the superlatively barbarous and bloody Theology of the *Edda*, which some depraved imaginations are so charmed with'.⁴⁹ According to Renan, even *Beowulf* plumbed the depths of bloodthirsty barbarism!⁵⁰ Since the eighteenth century, it would seem, the Germanic peoples had joined

⁴⁵For criticism of Spanish transmission see discussion and references in Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Thoughts on Ephrem the Syrian in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies presented to Peter Clemoes*, edited by Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 205–26. On the other side, see J. N. Hillgarth, 'Ireland and Spain in the Seventh Century', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), 1–16 (cf. Roger Collins's critical review of his *Visigothic Spain, Byzantium and the Irish in Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37 (1986), 145–46). Cf. n. 13 above. ⁴⁶*Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, edited by Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1901–3), II, 296. ⁴⁷Il est temps de noter, avant qu'ils passent, les tons divins expirant ainsi à l'horizon devant le tumulte croissant de l'uniforme civilisation', Renan, II, 253; translated by Hutchison, pp. 2–3. ⁴⁸Arnold, III, 295 and 303. ⁴⁹Hugh Blair, 'A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the son of Fingal' (1763), in James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian*, 2 vols (London, 1807), I, 95; Edward Williams [Iolo Morganwg], *Advertisement to his Ode on the Mythology of the Ancient British Bards* (1794), quoted by Snyder, p. 170 (cf. p. 43, n. 1). ⁵⁰Renan, II, 263; translated by Hutchison, p. 15. Cf. Galand, p. 120.

the ranks of the Philistines, and Mme de Staël's misty cold front of mystic Nordic imagination⁵¹ had cleared over Germany, veered westwards, and enveloped Brittany and the British Isles. *The Descent of Odin* had no place in this new literary map of medieval Europe.

The nineteenth-century quester after the Celtic spirit travelled with his face turned backwards towards an imagined Celtic Middle Ages. The truest, most typical Celts were the Breton ancestors whom Renan invoked as follows:

O pères de la tribu obscure au foyer de laquelle je puisai la foi à l'invisible, humble clan de laboureurs et de marins, à qui je dois d'avoir conservé la vigueur de mon âme en un pays éteint, en un siècle sans espérance, vous errâtes sans doute sur ces mers enchantées où notre père Brandan chercha la terre de promission; vous contemplâtes les vertes îles dont les herbes se baignaient dans les flots; vous parcourûtes avec saint Patrice les cercles de ce monde que nos yeux ne savent plus voir! Quelquefois je regrette que votre barque, en quittant l'Irlande ou la Cambrie, n'ait point obéi à d'autres vents. Je les vois dans mes rêves, ces cités pacifiques de Clonfert et de Lismore, où j'aurais dû vivre, pauvre Irlande, nourri du son de tes cloches, au récit de tes mystérieuses odyssées. . . .

O fathers of the obscure tribe from whose hearth I derived my faith in the invisible, O humble clan of labourers and sailors to whom I owe it that I have preserved the vigour of my soul in a burnt-out land, in a century without hope, you surely wandered over those enchanted seas where our father Brandan sought the land of promise; you beheld the green isles whose grasses bathed in the waves; you traversed with St Patrick the circles of this world our eyes no longer know how to see! Sometimes I sorrow that your ship, leaving Ireland or Wales, obeyed not other winds. I see them in my dreams, those peaceful cities of Clonfert and Lismore, where I would have dwelt, poor Ireland, nourished by the sound of your bells, by the recital of your mysterious odysses. . . .⁵²

This evocation of the Celts depends almost entirely on the historical lectures of Renan's teacher at the Sorbonne, the prolific Catholic medievalist Frédéric Ozanam. After a brief description of the early Irish monastic cities, such as Bangor and Clonfert, Ozanam had conjured up an image of the fusion of sacred and secular society in them:

Les bardes entraient au monastère, mais en y portant la harpe nationale, les chants, les souvenirs du pays . . . et, pendant que le moine est enfermé entre les murs étroits de sa cellule, son imagination erre sur les mers avec saint Brendan, ou parcourt le monde invisible à la suite de saint Patrice.

⁵¹See *ibid.*, p. 138. ⁵²Renan, II, 22 (*préface to Essais de morale et de critique*); my translation. Cf. Galand, pp. 144–47.

The bards entered the monastery, but took with them the national harp, the songs and the memories of the land . . . and, while the monk was shut up between the strict walls of his little cell, his imagination wandered over the seas with St Brendan, or traversed the invisible world in the steps of St Patrick.⁵³

Renan must, I think, have been attracted by the Romantic possibilities of his teacher's passing image. The Irish monk's cell would remind him of the cold Paris room he called his 'cell', where he studied, transcribed his dreams, longed for 'some vaguely defined absolute or God', and remembered Brittany as 'a lost paradise from which he had been exiled and to which he could not return'.⁵⁴ More generally, the kinship between Ozanam's wistful Dark Age monk and a Romantic poet or hero was irresistible. His words would strike an immediate chord with the early Romantic reevaluation of the world of dreams and the unconscious, of poetic vision, of fairy-tale fiction:⁵⁵

'Dreaming is nothing other than involuntary poetry' (Ludwig Heinrich von Jakob, and Jean-Paul).

'Knowledge of oneself [is a] descent into hell' (Hamann).

'We dream of journeys through the universe; is the universe not then within us? The depths of our spirit are unknown to us. The path of mystery leads towards the interior; within us, if anywhere, is eternity and its worlds, the past and the future' (Novalis).

'Genius is shown in interior meaning, not in external imitation, and every artist, every true poet is a seer or visionary' (Franz von Baader).

'Man is so far immersed in himself and entirely, so to speak, immersed in the entrails of the Universe, that getting up and going to sleep merely divert him from this centre and lead him to the surface of the earthly kingdom' (Ignaz Paul Vital Troxler).

'What should be our waking language is now the obscure language of dreams; the region of feeling and the soul, however pure it was once, is now a region full of dangers' (Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert).

'In beauty, as in horror, dreams create what is beyond the totality of experience, giving us simultaneously heaven, hell, and earth' (Jean-Paul).

'A fairy-tale is basically like a dream. . . . The true author of fairy-tales

⁵³A. F. Ozanam, *Oeuvres complètes*, IV, *La Civilisation chrétienne chez les Francs*, second edition (Paris, 1855), pp. 98–99; my translation. The Patrick reference is to the *Purgatory of St Patrick*. On Ozanam's impact on Renan, see Galand, pp. 57–71 and 119–20. ⁵⁴Wardman, pp. 27 and 30. Wardman describes Renan as 'a thorough-going Romantic who projected himself on to the universe and into any race or historical figure whom he at all resembled' (p. 211). ⁵⁵cf. the remarks on Herder in Albert Béguin, *L'Âme romantique et le rêve: essai sur le romantisme allemand et la poésie française*, new edition (Paris, 1946), p. 157; and in general, p. 154.

is a foreseer of the future. . . . All tales are simply dreams of the country that is everywhere and nowhere' (Novalis).⁵⁶

None of these late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century quotations are from Celtic or even French writers; they are all from the maligned, 'unimaginative' Germans! Renan, I suggest, in effect gave pseudo-historical substance to the German Romantic vision; he told the world that the dreamlike Celtic countries had once been peopled by real dreamers who penetrated the infinite secrets of the universe of the imagination. This was the Celtic myth he passed on to Arnold, Yeats, and the Celtic Renaissance, and in Ireland, as Easter 1916 approached, self-styled Celtic visionaries arose to dream unthinkable dreams.⁵⁷ Renan and Arnold's elevation of Celtic idealism contributed unwittingly to the 'anarchy in the mind and in the heart' that has been said to characterize Ireland after the death of Parnell,⁵⁸ and also to the relatively harmless cultural schizophrenia of the modern Anglophone writers of the 'Celtic Consciousness' ilk.

Although folklore later played a part in sustaining the image of the Visionary Celt, observation of flesh-and-blood modern Celts mattered little to Renan and Arnold, probably because the latter were preoccupied with an idealized Celtic past. Thus neither even mentions the Gaelic belief in 'second sight', though this had been reported and discussed since the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ I doubt that their silence was due to scientific scruples about the evidence,⁶⁰ nor because of the classical and medieval evidence which shows that belief in second sight was not peculiar to the Celtic peoples.⁶¹ Still

⁵⁶ibid., pp. 8 (and 189), 53, 53 (and 204), 75, 96, 114, 190, and 208-9. (I paraphrase Béguin's French, as the German is not given in the edition used.) Renan himself writes, in the *préface* to *Essais de morale et de critique*: 'Qui sait si nos rêves, à nous, ne sont pas plus vrais que la réalité?' (*Oeuvres complètes*, II, 22-23). ⁵⁷Lyons, pp. 85-94. Of course, in Nonconformist, radical Wales the story was very different; see Prys Morgan, 'Hunt for the Welsh Past', pp. 92-100, and 'Keeping the Legends Alive', in *Wales: The Imagined Nation: Studies in Cultural and National Identity*, edited by Tony Curtis (Bridgend, 1986), pp. 19-41. ⁵⁸cf. Lyons, p. 177. ⁵⁹See John L. Campbell and Trevor H. Hall, *Strange Things: The Story of Fr Allan McDonald, Ada Goodrich Freer, and the Society for Psychical Research's Enquiry into Highland Second Sight* (London, 1968), pp. 17-20. ⁶⁰Renan does, in fact, record a few Breton beliefs (cf. n. 72 below), for example 'une opinion répandue en ce pays que le sang parle, et que deux parents inconnus l'un à l'autre, se rencontrant sur quelque point du monde que ce soit, se reconnaissent à la secrète et mystérieuse émotion qu'ils éprouvent l'un devant l'autre' (II, 256; translated by Hutchison, p. 6). Cf. *Canu Llywarch Hen*, edited by Ifor Williams, second edition (Cardiff, 1953), p. 1; Ifor Williams, *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry* (Dublin, 1944), p. 37. ⁶¹See E. R. Dodds, 'Telepathy and Clairvoyance in Classical Antiquity', in *Greek Poetry and Life: Essays presented to Gilbert Murray* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 364-85; and *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 55. For example, the famous Scottish divination from sheep's shoulder-blades was mainstream Arabic and Christian science in the twelfth century (Charles S. F. Burnett, 'Arabic Divinatory Texts and Celtic Folklore: A Comment on the Theory and Practice of Scapulimancy in Western

less will they have been resisting the temptation that cumulatively besets successive travellers and ethnographers of exaggerating the importance and occurrence of occult practices in peripheral societies while tacitly minimizing their significance and incidence in metropolitan societies.⁶² Much the most probable reason for their silence on the subject of second sight was, as I have said, the backward-looking nature of their preoccupation with the Visionary Celt.

Their image of the Celt as visionary was really a *historical* reconstruction. Although to a large extent an invention of the Romantic imagination, as we have seen, it was also shaped by medieval Celtic literature as it was known to the European reading public and also by traditional ethnographic generalizations about the Celts. I wish to end by considering these two sources of influence which, though distinct, were interrelated, in that what foreigners have observed about the Celts has affected their choice of and approach to Celtic reading matter, and vice versa.⁶³

Before the end of the last century medieval Celtic literature was largely terra incognita outside, and to some extent within, the individual Celtic countries. To judge by Renan, the range of 'Celtic' literature known in mid-nineteenth-century France had enlarged little since the Middle Ages. Celtic Britain, a never-never land of marvel and adventure, was represented chiefly by the 'Mabinogion', with particular attention being paid to the Welsh analogues of the medieval French romances such as *Peredur/Perceval*. Ireland, too, was a land of marvel, as in the Middle Ages, when, according to Peter Rickard, French information about Ireland was founded almost exclusively on four works: the *Voyage of St Brendan*, the *Vision of Tnugdhal*, the *Purgatory of St Patrick*, and Gerald of Wales's *Topography of Ireland*.⁶⁴ All four works encouraged an unreal image of the Irish. The *Voyage of St Brendan* was easily misread as the story of an Irish obsession with unknown marvels beyond the western horizon, rather a symbolic realization on a geographical plane of the universal Christian quest, through penance and the annual liturgical cycle, for the 'promised land' of Christian eschatology. In fact, its unknown author was no naïve transcriber of native Celtic dreams of the infinite, but took wide-ranging European traditions about the

Europe', *CMCS*, 6 (Winter 1983), 31-42), and the Welsh *dynion hysbys* had their counterparts in the 'cunning men' of England (Geraint H. Jenkins, 'Popular Beliefs in Wales from the Restoration to Methodism', *BBCS*, 27 (1976-78), 440-62 (p. 450)). ⁶²Most of us would rather trust a seer in South Uist than South London! ⁶³Kelleher concludes that 'Arnold had made up his mind about Celtic literature before he consulted most of his material on it. How else can one explain his bland insistence that Macpherson's *Ossian*, for all that it was a fraud, still had "a residue with the very soul of Celtic genius in it"?' (p. 207; cf. Snyder, p. 90, n. 1). ⁶⁴P. Rickard, *Britain in Medieval French Literature 1100-1500* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 238 (referring to the period up to c. 1400).

peripheries of the world — perhaps including Alexander's Wonders of the East, Enoch and Elijah's earthly paradise, Judas's nether hell, Paul the First Hermit's Egyptian desert, the infernal fires of the Sicilian volcanoes, the Arctic icebergs of travellers' tales — and relocated them all in the western ocean.⁶⁵ Giovanni Orlandi suggests that he may have been influenced by the doctrine of the Antipodes.⁶⁶ I would prefer to think that he was influenced by the less mundane apprehensions that all peripheries are functionally identical in the world of human imagination and that space is merely a metaphor in the world of divine eschatology. Of the four works mentioned by Rickard, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* is the only one which may possibly have been written in Ireland, perhaps as early as the eighth century, though its manuscript tradition and popularity were non-Irish; the others were addressed to foreign audiences in the wake of the twelfth-century ecclesiastical, and then military, assault on Ireland. They were the result of Celtic/non-Celtic 'conspiracies' such as I described earlier. Gerald's *Topography*, the companion to his *Conquest of Ireland*, describes the untamed wildness and wonders of Ireland and the Irish for the instruction and admiration of her colonists; it is a contribution to the 'ideology of colonization'.⁶⁷ The *Vision of Tnugdál*, by an Irishman at Regensburg, comes out of the same literary milieu as St Bernard of Clairvaux's *Life of St Malachy*, a central document in the ecclesiastical attack on the values of the unreformed native Irish church. It looks two ways, addressing both the moral issues of the Irish reformers and current Continental theological issues concerning the nature of visions and the hereafter.⁶⁸ Its author's Ireland is an island in the distant western ocean, whose people go to extremes both in religion and in cruelty.⁶⁹ One such is Tnugdál, who is brought to contrition in 1149 when his soul is transported through heaven and hell. The *Purgatory of St Patrick*, by the English Cistercian author H[enry] of Saltrey, reports a similar

⁶⁵See *Benedict: The Anglo-Norman Voyage of St Brendan*, edited by Ian Short and Brian Merrilees (Manchester, 1979), pp. 18–19; Giovanni Orlandi, 'Temi e correnti nelle leggende di viaggio dell'occidente alto-medievale', *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo*, 29 (1983), 523–75. On the date of the *Navigatio* see *ibid.*, pp. 553, n. 95, and 574; Lapidge and Sharpe, no. 362 (Dr Dumville tells me that the cited article by him is not now to appear in *Romanobarbarica*). On the *Navigatio*'s influence on Ozanam, Renan, and Arnold, see M. Esposito, 'An Apocryphal "Book of Enoch and Elias" as a Possible Source of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*', *Celtica*, 5 (1960), 192–206. ⁶⁶Orlandi, p. 555. ⁶⁷cf. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, p. 45. ⁶⁸Claude Carozzi, 'Structure et fonction de la Vision de Tnugdál', in *Faire Croire: modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XII^e au XV^e siècle*, [edited by André Vauchez], Collection de l'École Française de Rome, 51 (Rome, 1981), pp. 223–34 (p. 226); cf. Le Goff, pp. 376, n. 9, and 389, n. 2; Lapidge and Sharpe, no. 730. For the Continental Irish context, see Pádraig A. Breatnach, 'The Origins of the Irish Monastic Tradition at Ratisbon (Regensburg)', *Celtica*, 13 (1980), 58–77. ⁶⁹*Visio Tnugdali, lateinisch und altdeutsch*, edited by Albrecht Wagner (Erlangen, 1882), pp. 5–6; cf. Gerald on the Welsh, below, p. 91.

journey in the reign of Stephen, made in the flesh by an Irish knight, *Oenus* (Renan's *Owenn*),⁷⁰ on a visit to his native land. Saltrey presents his journey into the interior of the earth as a test of virility, a chivalric exploit willingly undertaken against the odds; one may imagine its deep psychological appeal for the knights whom the Anglo-Norman Augustinian canons attracted to Ireland on pilgrimage to the cavern. Because of it, in the eyes of most Europeans, the entrance to hell switched from Sicily to Donegal. It need not surprise us that one periphery should attract the characteristics of another; at the time when Saltrey was writing, Gervase of Tilbury was hearing that King Arthur was alive and well and living in Etna.⁷¹

Long before Renan, then, the medieval French-reading public had become the victims of its own choice of Celtic reading matter, which fostered and supported an unreal image of the Celtic lands. There were sceptics, of course, but the literary tradition had a way of dealing with them. The Norman canon Wace made a disappointing trip to the magic fountain of Barenton in the Breton forest of Broceliande, and described it in a rather Johnsonian manner; Wace's account is imitated in the romance of *Yvain/Owein* and assigned to the inferior knight Calogrenant/Cynan — the true hero of the romance is of course successful on his quest.⁷² An Englishman, Sir William Lisle, told Froissart that the dreams he had when he spent the night in the 'cellar' at St Patrick's Purgatory were mere fantasy, and in 1494 a disillusioned Dutch canon complained to the Pope, who shut the pilgrimage down;⁷³ but Renan has the last word: 'only the Irish were able to behold the marvels of their Purgatory'.⁷⁴ They were, after all, Celts, and had not everyone agreed since classical times that there was something wild and spiritual about the Celts?

This brings us to the traditions of Celtic ethnography. To the sceptic the striking similarities between classical and modern descriptions of the Celts are due in part to modern perceptions being influenced by excessive deference to classical ethnography, and in

⁷⁰*Oenus* is said to be a native of Ireland (Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 180, col. 989) so *Oenus* hardly represents the Welsh name *Owein*, despite Yolande de Pontfarcy, 'Le *Tractatus de Purgatorio sancti Patricii* de H. de Saltrey: sa date et ses sources', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), 460–80 (p. 471). ⁷¹Le Goff, pp. 9, 95, 204–8, and 313–14. According to St John D. Seymour, 'in its literary form and matter there is nothing that can be described as distinctively Irish' in Saltrey's work (*Irish Visions of the Other-World* (London, 1930), p. 186). But for a possible lost precursor see Pádraig A. Breatnach, 'Medieval Traditions from West Munster', *Studia Hibernica*, 17/18 (1977–78), 58–70 (p. 60, n. 4). ⁷²Jean Frappier, *Étude sur Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris, 1969), pp. 28, n. 1, 79, n. 2, and 85–86. Renan discussed this magic fountain in a passage of folklore he excised from his essay (Galand, p. 87). ⁷³Shane Leslie, *Saint Patrick's Purgatory: A Record from History and Literature* (London, 1932), pp. 21–22 and 61–63. ⁷⁴Il est remarquable aussi que les Irlandais pouvaient seuls voir les merveilles de leur purgatoire' (Renan, II, 298; translated by Hutchison, p. 56).

part to the similar standpoint of ancient and modern ethnographers, for, in Chapman's words, 'the writers of classical antiquity and of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe were speaking for a social and intellectual polity that defined itself as ordered, rational, civilised and right, and . . . the Celt served them both as a figure of opposition, a mythical alter-ego which they used in pursuit of their own self-definition'.⁷⁵ Renan and Arnold, however, like many writers since, treat the classical ethnographers as disinterested and accurate observers. They note that classical writers were impressed by the religion of the Celts, a 'mysterious race, having an understanding of the future and the secret of death', and 'a special, profound, spiritual discipline',⁷⁶ without pondering the extent to which their authorities, like themselves, sought to point up the spirituality of the Celts as a contrast to the spiritual failings of their own societies. Classical ethnographers, just as much as modern ones, were influenced by theories about the Golden Age, the Barbarian and Noble Savage, the origin of religion and superstition.⁷⁷ Again, Renan cites the accounts given by Plutarch and Procopius of voyages to marvellous islands in the vicinity of Britain as if they were echoes of Celtic myths about journeys to the Otherworld,⁷⁸ when they are surely travellers' tales about the far western peripheries of the Greek-speaking world, analogues rather than echoes of medieval Celtic voyage-literature.⁷⁹ My point was made long ago by Gerald of Wales in a chapter ironically entitled 'Thule, an island of the West, very well known in the East, but entirely unknown in the West':

De Tyle, occidentali insula; que apud orientales est famosissima, cum occidentalibus sit prorsus incognita.

Mirum de Tyle, que inter occidentales ultima fertur insulas, quod apud orientales tam nomine quam natura sit famosissima; cum occidentalibus sit prorsus incognita.

A very remarkable thing about Thule, which is said to be the farthest of the western islands, is that it is very well known among the Eastern people

⁷⁵ "Semantics" and the "Celt", p. 129. ⁷⁶ . . . une race mystérieuse, ayant le sens de l'avenir et le secret de la mort' (Renan, II, 298; translated by Hutchison, p. 56); Arnold, III, 316. ⁷⁷ See Tierney, 'Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius'. ⁷⁸ Renan, II, 299; translated by Hutchison, p. 57. Cf. Galand, p. 129. ⁷⁹ For Procopius, see A. R. Burn, 'Procopius and the Island of Ghosts', *English Historical Review*, 70 (1955), 258–61, and E. A. Thompson, 'Procopius on Brittia and Britannia', *Classical Quarterly*, new series, 30 (1980), 498–507 (p. 505), also Sims-Williams, 'Settlement of England', p. 24, n. 100. (I have not seen the paper cited by Orlandi, p. 555, n. 100.) Cf. Chapman, "Semantics" and the "Celt", p. 124: 'The Celts were a people beyond the boundaries of rule and order and knowledge, and as such were a semi-mythological creation of the classical imagination. In some commentaries, they share the pages with creatures that we now regard as unequivocally mythical, and they share some of their characteristics'.

both in name and for its nature, although it is entirely unknown to the people of the West.⁸⁰

Characterizations of the Celts and the Celtic countries comparable to those of classical writers recur in the works of medieval writers, for comparable reasons. As a typical, if unusually explicit, example let us stay with Gerald of Wales, whom Robert Bartlett has shown to be a re-discoverer, or re-creator, of the genre of ethnography. Despite his own Norman-Welsh birth, Gerald portrays Wales and Ireland as remote countries on the edge of the world,⁸¹ and presents the Welsh and Irish in terms similar to those in which Slavic, Magyar, and Scandinavian barbarians were conceptualized in his London- and Paris-centred world.⁸² Like the classical geographers, Gerald fills the margins of the civilized world with marvels. He even explains why this should be so:

Sicut enim orientales plage propriis quibusdam et sibi innatis preeminet et precellunt ostentis, sic et occidentales circumferencie suis nature miraculis illustrantur. Quociens quippe tanquam seriis et veris fatigata negociis paululum secedit et excedit, remotis his partibus quasi verecundis et occultis natura ludit excessibus.

Just as the countries of the East are remarkable and distinguished for certain prodigies peculiar and native to themselves, so the boundaries of the West also are made remarkable by their own wonders of nature. For sometimes tired, as it were, of the true and the serious, she [Nature] draws aside and goes away, and in these remote parts indulges herself in these secret and distant freaks.⁸³

Again, like the Celtic barbarians of the classical ethnographers, Gerald's Welsh are a spiritual lesson as well as a warning to the civilized world:⁸⁴

Heremitas et anachoritas abstinentiae majoris, magisque spirituales, alibi non videas. Gens etenim haec in omni vehemens est intentione. Unde et sicut malis nusquam peiores, sic bonis meliores non reperies.

⁸⁰ *Giraldus Cambrensis in Topographia Hibernie: Text of the First Recension*, edited by John J. O'Meara, *PRIA*, 52, Section C, no. 4 (1949), 113–78 (p. 142); *The First Version of the Topography of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis*, translated by John J. O'Meara (Dundalk, 1951), p. 52. ⁸¹ R. R. Davies, *Historical Perception: Celts and Saxons* (Cardiff, 1979), p. 11. ⁸² Bartlett, pp. 158–77. ⁸³ *Topographia Hibernie: Text of the First Recension*, edited by O'Meara, p. 119; translated by O'Meara, p. 11 (I inserted 'Nature'). Cf. Bartlett, p. 190; Juliette Wood, 'The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature', *CMCS*, 10 (Winter 1985), 25–38 (pp. 26–27). ⁸⁴ *Descriptio Kambriae*, I.18, edited by Dimock, *Giraldi Opera*, VI, 204; translated by Thorpe, p. 254.

Nowhere can you see hermits and anchorites more abstinent and more spiritually committed than in Wales. The Welsh go to extremes in all matters. You will never find anyone worse than a bad Welshman, but you will certainly never find anyone better than a good one.

Gerald tells us, too, that in Wales, but hardly anywhere else (except ancient Troy, of course), one can still find *awenyddion*, successors of Merlin, who foresee the future by means of trances or visions.⁸⁵ In such ways Gerald conveys the impression of the 'otherness' both of the Celtic-speaking peoples and of their lands. There is moreover a close bond between peoples and lands. From a Norman colonial perspective, his Irish and Welsh are *silvatici*, savages, practising pastoral transhumance (a mark of the barbarian)⁸⁶ and supposedly living off roots and grasses like beasts.⁸⁷ Moreover, their legitimate native lords, unlike their conquerors, are at one with the chthonic powers that govern the land. One of Gerald's anecdotes illustrates this.

In the time of Henry I, Gruffudd ap Rhys ap Tewdwr came with two Norman marcher lords to Llyn Syfaddon, in Breconshire. An old Welsh saying told that if the rightful ruler of the land came to this lake and ordered the birds to sing, they would so do. When each of the Normans addressed them, they were silent. Then Gruffudd himself knelt and invoked God's help:

'Si ex naturalibus Walliae principibus me linealiter descendere fecisti, avibus istis ut hoc denuncient in nomine tuo praecipio.' Et continuo aviculae cunctae, quaelibet in suo genere, alis expansis aquam verberando, canere una et proclamare coeperunt.

'If You have ordained that I should descend in direct line from the native princes of Wales, make these birds declare it in Your name.' Immediately all the birds, each according to his kind, beat the water with their wings and began to sing with one accord and to declare him master.

When Henry I was told he said:

'Non adeo est admirandum. Quia licet gentibus illis per vires nostras

⁸⁵ibid., 1.16, edited by Dimock, pp. 194–200; translated by Thorpe, pp. 246–51. Cf. Williams, *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry*, pp. 8–9; Geraint Gruffydd, 'Meilyr Brydydd a Meilyr Awenydd', *Barn*, 213 (October 1980), 313–16; J. Gwyn Griffiths, 'Giraldus Cambrensis *Descriptio Kambriae*, i. 16', *BBCS*, 31 (1984), 1–16. On the Aulus Gellius second-sight story, which Gerald compares, see Dodds, 'Telepathy and Clairvoyance', p. 382. (Note that Gerald does not portray the *awenyddion* as quintessential Welshmen, any more than classical writers portray the druids as quintessential Celts.) ⁸⁶Bartlett, pp. 160–62 and 195. Cf. Nicholas P. Canny, 'The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 30 (1973), 575–98 (pp. 587 and 595). ⁸⁷See the anecdote quoted above, p. 77.

magnas injuriam et violentiam irrogemus, nihilominus tamen in terris eisdem jus hereditarium habere noscuntur.'

'I am not the slightest bit surprised. It is we who hold the power, and so we are free to commit acts of violence and injustice against these people, and yet we know full well that it is they who are the rightful heirs to the land.'⁸⁸

Natural marvels, and supernatural bonds between kings and their kingdoms mediated by persons with occult knowledge and power had long featured in medieval Celtic tradition, where they had a function within native thought about the triangular relationship of land, king, and poet;⁸⁹ they had been presented to a non-Celtic public in Celtic-Latin works such as Bishop Patrick's *Versus de Mirabilibus Hibernie*, the anonymous *De Duodecim Abusivis Saeculi*, and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*.⁹⁰ Gerald's story shows us very explicitly how such material might be re-interpreted within a colonial context — the context which probably gave rise to the Arthurian chivalric romance, with its exploration of the theme of *aventure*, the encounter with the marvellous and conquest of the fear of the unknown.

Renan complained that Romance writers like Chrétien de Troyes despised the Welsh and Bretons as brute beasts at the same time as exploiting their *mirabilia*.⁹¹ Yet both were parts of the colonial experience. Renan, like many other Celts, wanted to reject the 'brutish' image while retaining the 'marvellous' image, as though they were not two sides of the same colonial coin.

The marvellous Celt is, I would suggest, partly the product of the mass psychology of invaders, reacting to the uncertainties of unknown terrain and the unexpected survival of opponents apparently inferior in arms. In 1402, according to the English chroniclers,

about the mid of August, the king [Henry IV] to chastise the presumptuous attempts of the Welshmen, went with a great power of men into Wales,

⁸⁸*Itinerarium Kambriae*, 1.2, edited by Dimock, *Giraldi Opera*, vi, 35; translated by Thorpe, p. 95 (altering his translation of *naturalibus* as 'five'). ⁸⁹These themes are transparent in an Irish text like *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, in which several scholars have detected 'that magic of Celtic romance, which Matthew Arnold loved and praised' (*Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, edited by Eleanor Knott (Dublin, 1936), pp. ix–x, quoting Stokes). See Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology', in *The Irish Mind*, edited by Kearney, pp. 79–90 and 324; Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Regnum and Sacerdotium: Notes on Irish Tradition', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65 (1979), 443–79. These are more muted in Welsh, but particularly evident in the Book of Taliesin; see Marged Haycock, '“Preiddeu Annwn” and the Figure of Taliesin', *Studia Celtica*, 18/19 (1983–84), 52–78. See also Rachel Bromwich, 'Celtic Dynastic Themes and the Breton Lays', *Études celtiques*, 9 (1960–61), 439–74. ⁹⁰Lapidge and Sharpe, nos 310, 339, and 40. ⁹¹Renan, II, 299; translated by Hutchison, pp. 57–58. Cf. Arnold, III, 360 and 509–10; Rickard, p. 109 and n. 1.

is a foreseer of the future. . . . All tales are simply dreams of the country that is everywhere and nowhere' (Novalis).⁵⁶

None of these late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century quotations are from Celtic or even French writers; they are all from the maligned, 'unimaginative' Germans! Renan, I suggest, in effect gave pseudo-historical substance to the German Romantic vision; he told the world that the dreamlike Celtic countries had once been peopled by real dreamers who penetrated the infinite secrets of the universe of the imagination. This was the Celtic myth he passed on to Arnold, Yeats, and the Celtic Renaissance, and in Ireland, as Easter 1916 approached, self-styled Celtic visionaries arose to dream unthinkable dreams.⁵⁷ Renan and Arnold's elevation of Celtic idealism contributed unwittingly to the 'anarchy in the mind and in the heart' that has been said to characterize Ireland after the death of Parnell,⁵⁸ and also to the relatively harmless cultural schizophrenia of the modern Anglophone writers of the 'Celtic Consciousness' ilk.

Although folklore later played a part in sustaining the image of the Visionary Celt, observation of flesh-and-blood modern Celts mattered little to Renan and Arnold, probably because the latter were preoccupied with an idealized Celtic past. Thus neither even mentions the Gaelic belief in 'second sight', though this had been reported and discussed since the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ I doubt that their silence was due to scientific scruples about the evidence,⁶⁰ nor because of the classical and medieval evidence which shows that belief in second sight was not peculiar to the Celtic peoples.⁶¹ Still

⁵⁶ibid., pp. 8 (and 189), 53, 53 (and 204), 75, 96, 114, 190, and 208-9. (I paraphrase Béguin's French, as the German is not given in the edition used.) Renan himself writes, in the *préface* to *Essais de morale et de critique*: 'Qui sait si nos rêves, à nous, ne sont pas plus vrais que la réalité?' (*Oeuvres complètes*, II, 22-23). ⁵⁷Lyons, pp. 85-94. Of course, in Nonconformist, radical Wales the story was very different; see Prys Morgan, 'Hunt for the Welsh Past', pp. 92-100, and 'Keeping the Legends Alive', in *Wales: The Imagined Nation: Studies in Cultural and National Identity*, edited by Tony Curtis (Bridgend, 1986), pp. 19-41. ⁵⁸cf. Lyons, p. 177. ⁵⁹See John L. Campbell and Trevor H. Hall, *Strange Things: The Story of Fr Allan McDonald, Ada Goodrich Freer, and the Society for Psychical Research's Enquiry into Highland Second Sight* (London, 1968), pp. 17-20. ⁶⁰Renan does, in fact, record a few Breton beliefs (cf. n. 72 below), for example 'une opinion répandue en ce pays que le sang parle, et que deux parents inconnus l'un à l'autre, se rencontrant sur quelque point du monde que ce soit, se reconnaissent à la secrète et mystérieuse émotion qu'ils éprouvent l'un devant l'autre' (II, 256; translated by Hutchison, p. 6). Cf. *Canu Llywarch Hen*, edited by Ifor Williams, second edition (Cardiff, 1953), p. 1; Ifor Williams, *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry* (Dublin, 1944), p. 37. ⁶¹See E. R. Dodds, 'Telepathy and Clairvoyance in Classical Antiquity', in *Greek Poetry and Life: Essays presented to Gilbert Murray* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 364-85; and *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 55. For example, the famous Scottish divination from sheep's shoulder-blades was mainstream Arabic and Christian science in the twelfth century (Charles S. F. Burnett, 'Arabic Divinatory Texts and Celtic Folklore: A Comment on the Theory and Practice of Scapulimancy in Western

less will they have been resisting the temptation that cumulatively besets successive travellers and ethnographers of exaggerating the importance and occurrence of occult practices in peripheral societies while tacitly minimizing their significance and incidence in metropolitan societies.⁶² Much the most probable reason for their silence on the subject of second sight was, as I have said, the backward-looking nature of their preoccupation with the Visionary Celt.

Their image of the Celt as visionary was really a *historical* reconstruction. Although to a large extent an invention of the Romantic imagination, as we have seen, it was also shaped by medieval Celtic literature as it was known to the European reading public and also by traditional ethnographic generalizations about the Celts. I wish to end by considering these two sources of influence which, though distinct, were interrelated, in that what foreigners have observed about the Celts has affected their choice of and approach to Celtic reading matter, and vice versa.⁶³

Before the end of the last century medieval Celtic literature was largely terra incognita outside, and to some extent within, the individual Celtic countries. To judge by Renan, the range of 'Celtic' literature known in mid-nineteenth-century France had enlarged little since the Middle Ages. Celtic Britain, a never-never land of marvel and adventure, was represented chiefly by the 'Mabinogion', with particular attention being paid to the Welsh analogues of the medieval French romances such as *Peredur/Perceval*. Ireland, too, was a land of marvel, as in the Middle Ages, when, according to Peter Rickard, French information about Ireland was founded almost exclusively on four works: the *Voyage of St Brendan*, the *Vision of Tnugdál*, the *Purgatory of St Patrick*, and Gerald of Wales's *Topography of Ireland*.⁶⁴ All four works encouraged an unreal image of the Irish. The *Voyage of St Brendan* was easily misread as the story of an Irish obsession with unknown marvels beyond the western horizon, rather a symbolic realization on a geographical plane of the universal Christian quest, through penance and the annual liturgical cycle, for the 'promised land' of Christian eschatology. In fact, its unknown author was no naïve transcriber of native Celtic dreams of the infinite, but took wide-ranging European traditions about the

Europe', *CMCS*, 6 (Winter 1983), 31-42), and the Welsh *dynion hysbys* had their counterparts in the 'cunning men' of England (Geraint H. Jenkins, 'Popular Beliefs in Wales from the Restoration to Methodism', *BBCS*, 27 (1976-78), 440-62 (p. 450)). ⁶²Most of us would rather trust a seer in South Uist than South London! ⁶³Kelleher concludes that 'Arnold had made up his mind about Celtic literature before he consulted most of his material on it. How else can one explain his bland insistence that Macpherson's *Ossian*, for all that it was a fraud, still had "a residue with the very soul of Celtic genius in it"?' (p. 207; cf. Snyder, p. 90, n. 1). ⁶⁴P. Rickard, *Britain in Medieval French Literature 1100-1500* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 238 (referring to the period up to c. 1400).

peripheries of the world — perhaps including Alexander's Wonders of the East, Enoch and Elijah's earthly paradise, Judas's nether hell, Paul the First Hermit's Egyptian desert, the infernal fires of the Sicilian volcanoes, the Arctic icebergs of travellers' tales — and relocated them all in the western ocean.⁶⁵ Giovanni Orlandi suggests that he may have been influenced by the doctrine of the Antipodes.⁶⁶ I would prefer to think that he was influenced by the less mundane apprehensions that all peripheries are functionally identical in the world of human imagination and that space is merely a metaphor in the world of divine eschatology. Of the four works mentioned by Rickard, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* is the only one which may possibly have been written in Ireland, perhaps as early as the eighth century, though its manuscript tradition and popularity were non-Irish; the others were addressed to foreign audiences in the wake of the twelfth-century ecclesiastical, and then military, assault on Ireland. They were the result of Celtic/non-Celtic 'conspiracies' such as I described earlier. Gerald's *Topography*, the companion to his *Conquest of Ireland*, describes the untamed wildness and wonders of Ireland and the Irish for the instruction and admiration of her colonists; it is a contribution to the 'ideology of colonization'.⁶⁷ The *Vision of Tnugdál*, by an Irishman at Regensburg, comes out of the same literary milieu as St Bernard of Clairvaux's *Life of St Malachy*, a central document in the ecclesiastical attack on the values of the unreformed native Irish church. It looks two ways, addressing both the moral issues of the Irish reformers and current Continental theological issues concerning the nature of visions and the hereafter.⁶⁸ Its author's Ireland is an island in the distant western ocean, whose people go to extremes both in religion and in cruelty.⁶⁹ One such is Tnugdál, who is brought to contrition in 1149 when his soul is transported through heaven and hell. The *Purgatory of St Patrick*, by the English Cistercian author H[enry] of Saltrey, reports a similar

⁶⁵See *Benedeit: The Anglo-Norman Voyage of St Brendan*, edited by Ian Short and Brian Merrilees (Manchester, 1979), pp. 18–19; Giovanni Orlandi, 'Temi e correnti nelle leggende di viaggio dell'occidente alto-medievale', *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo*, 29 (1983), 523–75. On the date of the *Navigatio* see *ibid.*, pp. 553, n. 95, and 574; Lapidge and Sharpe, no. 362 (Dr Dumville tells me that the cited article by him is not now to appear in *Romanobarbarica*). On the *Navigatio*'s influence on Ozanam, Renan, and Arnold, see M. Esposito, 'An Apocryphal "Book of Enoch and Elias" as a Possible Source of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*', *Celtica*, 5 (1960), 192–206. ⁶⁶Orlandi, p. 555. ⁶⁷cf. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, p. 45. ⁶⁸Claude Carozzi, 'Structure et fonction de la Vision de Tnugdál', in *Faire Croire: modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XII^e au XV^e siècle*, [edited by André Vauchez], Collection de l'École Française de Rome, 51 (Rome, 1981), pp. 223–34 (p. 226); cf. Le Goff, pp. 376, n. 9, and 389, n. 2; Lapidge and Sharpe, no. 730. For the Continental Irish context, see Pádraig A. Breatnach, 'The Origins of the Irish Monastic Tradition at Ratisbon (Regensburg)', *Celtica*, 13 (1980), 58–77. ⁶⁹*Visio Tnugdali, lateinisch und altdeutsch*, edited by Albrecht Wagner (Erlangen, 1882), pp. 5–6; cf. Gerald on the Welsh, below, p. 91.

journey in the reign of Stephen, made in the flesh by an Irish knight, *Oenus* (Renan's *Owenn*),⁷⁰ on a visit to his native land. Saltrey presents his journey into the interior of the earth as a test of virility, a chivalric exploit willingly undertaken against the odds; one may imagine its deep psychological appeal for the knights whom the Anglo-Norman Augustinian canons attracted to Ireland on pilgrimage to the cavern. Because of it, in the eyes of most Europeans, the entrance to hell switched from Sicily to Donegal. It need not surprise us that one periphery should attract the characteristics of another; at the time when Saltrey was writing, Gervase of Tilbury was hearing that King Arthur was alive and well and living in Etna.⁷¹

Long before Renan, then, the medieval French-reading public had become the victims of its own choice of Celtic reading matter, which fostered and supported an unreal image of the Celtic lands. There were sceptics, of course, but the literary tradition had a way of dealing with them. The Norman canon Wace made a disappointing trip to the magic fountain of Barenton in the Breton forest of Broceliande, and described it in a rather Johnsonian manner; Wace's account is imitated in the romance of *Yvain/Owein* and assigned to the inferior knight Calogrenant/Cynan — the true hero of the romance is of course successful on his quest.⁷² An Englishman, Sir William Lisle, told Froissart that the dreams he had when he spent the night in the 'cellar' at St Patrick's Purgatory were mere fantasy, and in 1494 a disillusioned Dutch canon complained to the Pope, who shut the pilgrimage down;⁷³ but Renan has the last word: 'only the Irish were able to behold the marvels of their Purgatory'.⁷⁴ They were, after all, Celts, and had not everyone agreed since classical times that there was something wild and spiritual about the Celts?

This brings us to the traditions of Celtic ethnography. To the sceptic the striking similarities between classical and modern descriptions of the Celts are due in part to modern perceptions being influenced by excessive deference to classical ethnography, and in

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Mirum de Tyle, que inter occidentales ultima fertur insulas, quod apud orientales tam nomine quam natura sit famosissima; cum occidentalibus sit prorsus incognita.

A very remarkable thing about Thule, which is said to be the farthest of the western islands, is that it is very well known among the Eastern people

⁷⁵ "Semantics" and the "Celt", p. 129. ⁷⁶ . . . une race mystérieuse, ayant le sens de l'avenir et le secret de la mort' (Renan, II, 298; translated by Hutchison, p. 56); Arnold, III, 316. ⁷⁷ See Tierney, 'Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius'. ⁷⁸ Renan, II, 299; translated by Hutchison, p. 57. Cf. Galand, p. 129. ⁷⁹ For Procopius, see A. R. Burn, 'Procopius and the Island of Ghosts', *English Historical Review*, 70 (1955), 258-61, and E. A. Thompson, 'Procopius on Brittia and Britannia', *Classical Quarterly*, new series, 30 (1980), 498-507 (p. 505), also Sims-Williams, 'Settlement of England', p. 24, n. 100. (I have not seen the paper cited by Orlandi, p. 555, n. 100.) Cf. Chapman, "Semantics" and the "Celt", p. 124: 'The Celts were a people beyond the boundaries of rule and order and knowledge, and as such were a semi-mythological creation of the classical imagination. In some commentaries, they share the pages with creatures that we now regard as unequivocally mythical, and they share some of their characteristics'.

both in name and for its nature, although it is entirely unknown to the people of the West.⁸⁰

Characterizations of the Celts and the Celtic countries comparable to those of classical writers recur in the works of medieval writers, for comparable reasons. As a typical, if unusually explicit, example let us stay with Gerald of Wales, whom Robert Bartlett has shown to be a re-discoverer, or re-creator, of the genre of ethnography. Despite his own Norman-Welsh birth, Gerald portrays Wales and Ireland as remote countries on the edge of the world,⁸¹ and presents the Welsh and Irish in terms similar to those in which Slavic, Magyar, and Scandinavian barbarians were conceptualized in his London- and Paris-centred world.⁸² Like the classical geographers, Gerald fills the margins of the civilized world with marvels. He even explains why this should be so:

Sicut enim orientales plage propriis quibusdam et sibi innatis preeminet et precellunt ostentis, sic et occidentales circumferencie suis nature miraculis illustrantur. Quociens quippe tanquam seriis et veris fatigata negociis paululum secedit et excedit, remotis his partibus quasi verecundis et occultis natura ludit excessibus.

Just as the countries of the East are remarkable and distinguished for certain prodigies peculiar and native to themselves, so the boundaries of the West also are made remarkable by their own wonders of nature. For sometimes tired, as it were, of the true and the serious, she [Nature] draws aside and goes away, and in these remote parts indulges herself in these secret and distant freaks.⁸³

Again, like the Celtic barbarians of the classical ethnographers, Gerald's Welsh are a spiritual lesson as well as a warning to the civilized world:⁸⁴

Heremitas et anachoritas abstinentiae majoris, magisque spirituales, alibi non videas. Gens etenim haec in omni vehemens est intentione. Unde et sicut malis nusquam peiores, sic bonis meliores non reperies.

⁸⁰ *Giraldus Cambrensis in Topographia Hibernie: Text of the First Recension*, edited by John J. O'Meara, *PRIA*, 52, Section C, no. 4 (1949), 113-78 (p. 142); *The First Version of the Topography of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis*, translated by John J. O'Meara (Dundalk, 1951), p. 52. ⁸¹ R. R. Davies, *Historical Perception: Celts and Saxons* (Cardiff, 1979), p. 11. ⁸² Bartlett, pp. 158-77. ⁸³ *Topographia Hibernie: Text of the First Recension*, edited by O'Meara, p. 119; translated by O'Meara, p. 11 (I inserted 'Nature'). Cf. Bartlett, p. 190; Juliette Wood, 'The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature', *CMCS*, 10 (Winter 1985), 25-38 (pp. 26-27). ⁸⁴ *Descriptio Kambriae*, I.18, edited by Dimock, *Giraldi Opera*, VI, 204; translated by Thorpe, p. 254.

Nowhere can you see hermits and anchorites more abstinent and more spiritually committed than in Wales. The Welsh go to extremes in all matters. You will never find anyone worse than a bad Welshman, but you will certainly never find anyone better than a good one.

Gerald tells us, too, that in Wales, but hardly anywhere else (except ancient Troy, of course), one can still find *awenyddion*, successors of Merlin, who foresee the future by means of trances or visions.⁸⁵ In such ways Gerald conveys the impression of the 'otherness' both of the Celtic-speaking peoples and of their lands. There is moreover a close bond between peoples and lands. From a Norman colonial perspective, his Irish and Welsh are *silvatici*, savages, practising pastoral transhumance (a mark of the barbarian)⁸⁶ and supposedly living off roots and grasses like beasts.⁸⁷ Moreover, their legitimate native lords, unlike their conquerors, are at one with the chthonic powers that govern the land. One of Gerald's anecdotes illustrates this.

In the time of Henry I, Gruffudd ap Rhys ap Tewdwr came with two Norman marcher lords to Llyn Syfaddon, in Breconshire. An old Welsh saying told that if the rightful ruler of the land came to this lake and ordered the birds to sing, they would so do. When each of the Normans addressed them, they were silent. Then Gruffudd himself knelt and invoked God's help:

'Si ex naturalibus Walliae principibus me linealiter descendere fecisti, avibus istis ut hoc denuncient in nomine tuo praecipio.' Et continuo aviculae cunctae, quaelibet in suo genere, alis expansis aquam verberando, canere una et proclamare coeperunt.

'If You have ordained that I should descend in direct line from the native princes of Wales, make these birds declare it in Your name.' Immediately all the birds, each according to his kind, beat the water with their wings and began to sing with one accord and to declare him master.

When Henry I was told he said:

'Non adeo est admirandum. Quia licet gentibus illis per vires nostras

⁸⁵ibid., i.16, edited by Dimock, pp. 194–200; translated by Thorpe, pp. 246–51. Cf. Williams, *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry*, pp. 8–9; Geraint Gruffydd, 'Meilyr Brydydd a Meilyr Awenydd', *Barn*, 213 (October 1980), 313–16; J. Gwyn Griffiths, 'Giraldus Cambrensis *Descriptio Kambriae*, i. 16', *BBCS*, 31 (1984), 1–16. On the Aulus Gellius second-sight story, which Gerald compares, see Dodds, 'Telepathy and Clairvoyance', p. 382. (Note that Gerald does not portray the *awenyddion* as quintessential Welshmen, any more than classical writers portray the druids as quintessential Celts.) ⁸⁶Bartlett, pp. 160–62 and 195. Cf. Nicholas P. Canny, 'The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 30 (1973), 575–98 (pp. 587 and 595). ⁸⁷See the anecdote quoted above, p. 77.

magnas injuriam et violentiam irrogemus, nihilominus tamen in terris eisdem jus hereditarium habere noscuntur.'

'I am not the slightest bit surprised. It is we who hold the power, and so we are free to commit acts of violence and injustice against these people, and yet we know full well that it is they who are the rightful heirs to the land.'⁸⁸

Natural marvels, and supernatural bonds between kings and their kingdoms mediated by persons with occult knowledge and power had long featured in medieval Celtic tradition, where they had a function within native thought about the triangular relationship of land, king, and poet;⁸⁹ they had been presented to a non-Celtic public in Celtic-Latin works such as Bishop Patrick's *Versus de Mirabilibus Hibernie*, the anonymous *De Duodecim Abusivis Saeculi*, and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*.⁹⁰ Gerald's story shows us very explicitly how such material might be re-interpreted within a colonial context — the context which probably gave rise to the Arthurian chivalric romance, with its exploration of the theme of *aventure*, the encounter with the marvellous and conquest of the fear of the unknown.

Renan complained that Romance writers like Chrétien de Troyes despised the Welsh and Bretons as brute beasts at the same time as exploiting their *mirabilia*.⁹¹ Yet both were parts of the colonial experience. Renan, like many other Celts, wanted to reject the 'brutish' image while retaining the 'marvellous' image, as though they were not two sides of the same colonial coin.

The marvellous Celt is, I would suggest, partly the product of the mass psychology of invaders, reacting to the uncertainties of unknown terrain and the unexpected survival of opponents apparently inferior in arms. In 1402, according to the English chroniclers,

about the mid of August, the king [Henry IV] to chastise the presumptuous attempts of the Welshmen, went with a great power of men into Wales,

⁸⁸*Itinerarium Kambriae*, i.2, edited by Dimock, *Giraldi Opera*, vi, 35; translated by Thorpe, p. 95 (altering his translation of *naturalibus* as 'five'). ⁸⁹These themes are transparent in an Irish text like *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, in which several scholars have detected 'that magic of Celtic romance, which Matthew Arnold loved and praised' (*Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, edited by Eleanor Knott (Dublin, 1936), pp. ix–x, quoting Stokes). See Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology', in *The Irish Mind*, edited by Kearney, pp. 79–90 and 324; Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Regnum and Sacerdotium: Notes on Irish Tradition', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65 (1979), 443–79. These are more muted in Welsh, but particularly evident in the Book of Taliesin; see Marged Haycock, 'Preiddeu Annwn' and the Figure of Taliesin', *Studia Celtica*, 18/19 (1983–84), 52–78. See also Rachel Bromwich, 'Celtic Dynastic Themes and the Breton Lays', *Études celtiques*, 9 (1960–61), 439–74. ⁹⁰Lapidge and Sharpe, nos 310, 339, and 40. ⁹¹Renan, ii, 299; translated by Hutchison, pp. 57–58. Cf. Arnold, iii, 360 and 509–10; Rickard, p. 109 and n. 1.

to pursue the capteine of the Welsh rebeill Owen Glendouer, but in effect he lost his labor; for Owen conveyed himself out of the waie, into his known lurking places, and (as was thought) through art magike, he caused such foule weather of winds, tempest, raine, snow, and haile to be raised, for the annoiance of the king's armie, that the like had not been heard of; in such sort, that the king was constrained to returne home.⁹²

Such a response was not, however, entirely due to the unaided lurid imagination of the English. To bolster Welsh morale and undermine English morale, leaders like Owain Glyn Dŵr (Owen Glendower) cultivated what Holinshed calls 'those blind and fantastical dreames of the Welsh prophesiers' — bardic prophecies of a coming deliverer, often ascribed to Merlin, which English statutes attempted to suppress.⁹³ The Welsh, then, had a definite interest in accepting their 'otherness'. Such defence mechanisms helped to characterize Wales and the Welsh in English eyes. Arnold was getting the intended message when he assigned the Celts a 'spiritual power' against the Saxons' 'material power'.⁹⁴ And so too was that first Cambridge student of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, Thomas Gray, in his great Ode, *The Bard*, completed in 1757 on the eve of the Ossianic awakening. Edward I, winding 'his toilsome march . . . down the steep of Snowdon's shaggy side', is confronted by the last survivor of the Welsh bards massacred (it was believed) by the English. This bard is both a reminiscence of Raphael's God and Milton's Satan and a Romantic emanation of the Alpine landscape in which he stands.⁹⁵

⁹²I quote Holinshed, from *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, edited by Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols (London, 1957–75), iv, 182–83, but the earlier *Annales Henrici Quarti* are similar; see *Johannis de Trokelowe, et Henrici de Blaneforde, necnon Quorundam Anonymorum Chronica et Annales*, edited by Henry Thomas Riley, RS (London, 1866), p. 343. Cf. J. E. Lloyd, *Owen Glendower* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 54–55. An ambiguity in the passages in *Annales Henrici Quarti* (p. 349) and Holinshed (Bullough, iv, 184) really relating to the portents at the birth of Edmund Mortimer (Lloyd, p. 52, n. 3) paved the way for the wondrous nativity of Shakespeare's Glendower (*1 Henry IV*, iii.1). ⁹³Bullough, iv, 185; Holinshed also says that Owain 'and his Welshmen' also put it about that Richard II was still alive (*ibid.*, p. 187). A statute in response to the 1402 débâcle banned Welsh rhymers and minstrels (that is, bards); see Lloyd, pp. 55–56. For Owain's dealings with prophets see *ibid.*, pp. 31 and 68–69; V. J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1971), pp. 117–19. In general, see Glanmor Williams, 'Prophecy, Poetry, and Politics in Medieval and Tudor Wales', in his *Religion, Language, and Nationality in Wales* (Cardiff, 1979), pp. 71–86. On the lasting English reputation of Merlin and the Welsh for wizardry and prophecy see Jenkins, 'Popular Beliefs', pp. 449 and 455. Renan was aware of such features of Welsh society from Augustin Thierry's *Histoire de la conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands* (cf. Galand, p. 121), which includes a translation of the prophetic poem *Armes Prydein*, and gives prominence to Celtic poets in general (although Thierry does not use the term 'Celtic'). ⁹⁴Arnold, iii, 298. ⁹⁵Cf. Arthur Johnston, *Thomas Gray and The Bard* (Cardiff, 1966); F. I.

Robed in the sable garb of woe,
With haggard eyes the Poet stood;
(Loose his beard, and hoary hair
Stream'd, like a meteor, to the troubled air)
And with a Master's hand, and Prophet's fire,
Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre.
'Hark, how each giant-oak, and desert cave,
Sighs to the torrent's awful voice beneath!
O'er thee, oh King! their hundred arms they wave,
Revenge on thee in hoarser murmurs breath[e]. . . .'

The identification of Celtic bard and Romantic poet is close at hand; the way is clear for Renan to take the part for the whole and invest the whole 'Celtic race' with the soul of the Romantic bard. Such metonymy was characteristic of early Romantic racialism. Yet, as in much else, the Romantics may have been anticipated (or have felt themselves to have been anticipated) by Shakespeare. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Shakespeare, elaborating on the English chronicles, juxtaposes a particular Visionary Celt, Glendower —

I can call spirits from the vasty deep

with a particular Blunt Yorkshireman, Hotspur —

Why, so can I, or so can any man;
but will they come when you do call for them?

In this play, according to Tillyard, Shakespeare attempted to create a 'picture of England', and 'one of this whole scene's main functions is to create a sense of England through a contrast with Wales'. The 'bluff anglicism of Hotspur [is] contrasted with Glendower's Welsh romanticism' and 'his fits of English passion are utterly opposed to the Welsh dream-world inhabited by Glendower'.⁹⁶ Tillyard commented that the 'forthright Englishman had long been a stock figure in the drama, often contrasted with the effeminate French',⁹⁷

McCarthy, 'The Bard of Thomas Gray: Its Composition and its Use by Painters', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 14 (1965–66), 105–12 and plates 4–11. Gray's scenery was inspired by the Alps rather than Snowdonia, which he had not seen. For his influence on Welsh idolization of the bard, see Morgan, 'Hunt for the Welsh Past', pp. 82–83. ⁹⁶E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, new edition (Harmondsworth, 1966), pp. 289 and 304–5. (The 'scene' is iii.1.) Cf. Arthur E. Hughes, 'Shakespeare and his Welsh Characters', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1917–18, pp. 159–88; Lloyd, pp. 5–7. Mr J. F. Kerrigan points out to me that Tillyard was writing during the Second World War, and notes that treating Hotspur as a representative of England ignores the extent to which Elizabethans regarded Yorkshire as regional, exotic, and disloyal; later nationalism clouds for us Shakespeare's attempt to set up a constellation of roles defined by place in *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. ⁹⁷Tillyard, p. 289.

correctly seeing that the English national temperament is created by systematic oppositions, and realising that the effeminate Frenchman and forthright Englishman are constructs. But what about Tillyard's romantic, dreaming Welshman? I have a suspicion that he is being taken as a given. Certainly, one of the writers in *The Celtic Consciousness* tells us that Shakespeare 'brilliantly evokes the Celtic character in the person of Owen Glendower'.⁹⁸

Tierney says that 'compressed group-characterizations' have been a feature of ethnography since Ancient times.⁹⁹ This suggests that they will be with us for a long time to come. Certainly the odd O'Donnell lecture will not dispose of the Visionary Celt, any more than of the Forthright Englishman or Effeminate Frenchman. Perhaps these are harmless, even useful, metaphors for various types of personality, provided we recognize them for what they are. But, as I have tried to show, in historical and literary scholarship the easy opposition of Celt and Anglo-Saxon — which none of us can have wholly escaped — can be more of a hindrance than an aid to clear thought. If, as the structural anthropologists teach, thinking in polarities is a universal characteristic of the human mind, it seems inevitable that the *Kulturkampf* of Celt and Anglo-Saxon¹⁰⁰ will continue to grip the scholarly and popular imagination; yet I should at least like to leave you with the question whether it is a valid or even helpful model through which to perceive the world.

⁹⁸Anne Ross, 'Material Culture, Myth and Folk Memory', in *The Celtic Consciousness*, edited by O'Driscoll, pp. 197–216 (p. 203). For the late-eighteenth-century revaluation of Glyn Dŵr see Morgan, 'Hunt for the Welsh Past', pp. 81–82. ⁹⁹Tierney, pp. 191 and 211. ¹⁰⁰cf. Lyons, p. 61 and n. 5.