

Pagan and Christian, nativists and anti-nativists

Discussion of the otherworld or of otherworlds in early medieval Irish literature has been dominated by the question of whether the otherworld imaginings found in these texts are of Christian, biblical and classical origin, or alternatively were transmitted to the authors from Ireland's native pagan past. In this regard, the study of the otherworld tales follows a pattern that can be seen throughout early Irish literary studies. The questions that have occupied scholars are: (i) what is native and what is borrowed? (ii) what is Christian and what is pagan?

Older scholarship tended strongly to see the native, pagan element in early Irish literature as the major one, regarding Christianity as something of a veneer over a basically intact pagan core. Hand-in-hand with this there was a reluctance to see the written texts which we possess as being consciously wrought artistic works by authors. Instead, they were seen as more or less accurate representations of previously existing oral compositions, implied to be of great antiquity. This minimized the role of the Christian monastic scribes in shaping the texts. In some cases, obviously Christian elements were dismissed as interpolations which could be isolated and removed, leaving a native, pagan core. Myles Dillon, for instance, dismissed the Christian references in the voyage tale *Immram Brain* as younger additions to a basically pagan oral tale.

The rise of anti-nativism

An early voice raised against this kind of approach was that of James Carney. He insisted that the texts of early Irish literature were precisely that: texts. In other words, they were literary works, shaped by their Christian, monastic authors. Though Carney conceded that oral sources could well lie behind some of the material within them, he rejected the idea that the texts could provide any meaningful insight into what Irish oral narrative was like before writing. For Carney, *Immram Brain* was a thoroughly Christian text from its inception.

Carney coined the term 'nativist' to describe the views he was attacking in this seminal essay. No equivalent term has so far appeared to describe the adherents of the Carney approach, so we will have to use 'anti-nativists'. The two positions have arguably been in existence ever since early Irish studies was founded, and most scholars in the field can best be described as holding some pragmatic combination of the two. This might be said of Proinsias Mac Cana, for instance, who debated the question of *Immram Brain* with Carney during the 1970s, though Mac Cana was definitely situated towards the nativist end of the spectrum.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the dispute between the two camps became heated. Ground-breaking work in the 1980s showed that early Irish law had

been significantly influenced by the canon law of the Christian church, and that caused scholars to think of the laws more as documents of their own time (the 7th and 8th centuries) rather than as faithful records of immemorial tradition.

Turning to more general literature, a key intervention was made by Kim McCone in 1990. His book, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, is an important but difficult and sometimes confused work. It had a very mixed reception, even from scholars who broadly accepted the anti-nativist position. Nevertheless, the anti-nativist trend has been in the ascendancy in early Irish studies ever since.

Reading

This is a typical ‘nativist’ reading of early Irish literature. It will be enough for you to read the two chapters on ‘Adventures’ and ‘Voyages’:

Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago, 1948).

Here is Carney’s seminal essay. The section on *Immram Brain* is particularly relevant for our purposes:

James Carney, ‘The External Element in Irish Saga’, in James Carney, *Studies in Irish History and Literature* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 276–373.

McCone’s book. Reading just the introduction, pp. 1–28, will suffice for now, though we will return to the book later on. The devastating review by David Dumville in *Peritia*, 10 (1996), 389–98 is worth considering too if you have time:

Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990).

Finally, a recent article suggests that the anti-nativists may not have had the last word, and that the debate will continue:

Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘Reapproaching the Pagan Celtic Past – Anti-Nativism, Asterisk Reality and the Late-Antiquity Paradigm’, *Studia Celtica Fennica*, VI (2009), 51–74. Available online, link in Moodle.

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