

Eoin MacNeill and the promotion of Celtic Studies in America

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In his book, *Celtic Ireland*, published in 1921, Eoin MacNeill expressed the view that: 'In ancient Ireland alone we find the autobiography of a people of European white men who come into history not moulded into the mould of the complex East nor forced to accept the law of imperial Rome.' MacNeill's contemporary, RAS Macalister, Professor of Celtic Archaeology at UCD, expressed a similar view in 1927 and noted that Ireland and Scandinavia were the most important European countries to the ethnologist and social historian because 'all the rest have been forced into a Roman mould which has distorted or destroyed the native institutions.' These ideas reflected a desire for a Northern European Celtic racial and cultural purity which also had social and economic implications for Irish people at home and abroad. A Celtic identity in the 1930s was advantageous for potential immigrants to the United States, for burgeoning tourism and US investment in the Irish Free State. After independence Ireland was positioning herself culturally within Celtic Europe and within the American diaspora. However, ideas about Celtic purity were not new and had been expressed by antiquarians in the nineteenth century including Samuel Ferguson, William Wilde and George Petrie. Studies generally focussed on the inhabitants of the Aran Islands, described by Petrie as having 'escaped contamination' and retaining a 'delightful pristine purity.' In 1892, A.C. Haddon and Dr. C.R. Browne carried out a scientific survey of the Aran Islanders. Haddon co-founded the Anthropometric Laboratory at Trinity College which was modelled on the London Laboratory of Francis Galton, the founder of Eugenics. The aim of the work conducted at the Dublin Anthropometric Laboratory was to gain an understanding of the racial characteristics of the Irish people. Eoin MacNeill got his own anthropometric chart, signed by Professor A.C. Haddon, completed there on 11 February 1893.

A scientific underpinning of Celtic identity became increasingly important in the 1930s when race was not just a feature of academic discourse in American, British and European universities but had serious political connotations for the newly independent Irish Free State. It was through its unique and respected culture that political and economic strides could be made. Eoin MacNeill worked assiduously to encourage the development of Celtic Studies in the United States and it was for this purpose that he embarked on a tour there in 1930. He had been invited to do so by Professor Arthur C. L. Brown of Northwestern University in Illinois, Professor Tom Peete Cross, of the

University of Chicago and Professor Robert D. Scott, of the University of Nebraska. He described these scholars as 'of the highest reputation on both sides of the Atlantic as authorities on the mediaeval literatures of Northern and Western Europe.' During his tour, he visited Harvard, Columbia, New York, Yale, Fordham, Notre Dame, and Northwestern University. He travelled on the White Star liner *Baltic* which docked in New York on 2 April 1930. That day's edition of the *New York City Journal* described how 'Secret Service men were all watching when Dr. Eoin McNeill, Irish patriot and scholar stepped down the gangplank of the *Baltic* of the White Star Line today.' It was also reported that detectives of the bomb squad and police in uniform were present because of political threats made against him. He was escorted to his car from the pier and was met there by representatives of New York University and also by the Irish Free State Trade Office.

MacNeill's first lecture was on early Celtic institutions and law which was delivered at New York University on 2 April 1930. After his completion of a series of lectures on early Celtic law, a dinner was given jointly by the American Irish Historical Society of New York and the University Law School to honour him. James McGurrian, President-General of the Society, was one of the speakers at the dinner. Others included the former judge Daniel F. Cohalan, founder of the Sinn Féin League of New York with John Devoy in 1907 and Harold O. Voorhis, Vice-Chancellor and Secretary of NYU. Dean Frank H. Sommer announced that a 'MacNeill Alcove' would be established in the library of the NYU law school and that a fund had already been established for the purpose. It was the intention to fill the alcove with 'works on Irish history and kindred subjects.' MacNeill revealed in his address to those assembled that 'he did not believe in impartial national histories' and that he was 'willing frankly to admit his inability to write an impartial history of Ireland.' This admission gives an insight into his philosophy of history, his nationalist perspective of the past, and also the expectations of his Irish-American audience. MacNeill wrote to his wife, Taddie, on 7 May 1930: 'I find a very great and growing interest in the cultural side of Irish affairs, and I am doing all I can to stimulate it.'

MacNeill encouraged the Professor of Celtic at Columbia University, New York, John L. Gerig, to form a group of 'Friends of the Universities of Ireland.' In his correspondence

with E.J. Gwynn of Trinity College Dublin, Gerig explained that one of the aims of this organisation was to preserve and expand the influence of Irish studies and culture in American universities. Gerig posed the question 'Will Celtic disappear in the maelstrom of modern internationalism, fostered by the aeroplane, radio, etc.' He announced a plan that Harvard and Columbia universities would join together to establish a university in the Scottish Highlands 'to serve as a world centre of Celtic culture and to preserve the Scottish and Irish dialects from the extinction threatened by the rapid advance of English as a world tongue.' It was his view that 'It would be most regrettable if the beautiful and romantic tradition of the Celt should disappear from the face of the earth in the amalgamation of cultures toward which all nations are tending.' This suspicion of multiculturalism and the melting pot was a common theme among eugenic thinkers in America. Multiculturalism was also associated with the term 'race suicide,' a fear commonly invoked in an effort to restrict European immigration. Gerig concluded that 'the plans for the university were to be kept free from any 'possible suggestion of propaganda or political interest' and that such a movement should 'emphasise to the Scots and the Irish the role of America in world culture.' Gwynn wrote to Gerig on 10 Nov 1930 that 'it is a great satisfaction to know that the decline of Celtic Scholarship in France and Germany is being counterbalanced to some extent by the increasing interest shown in the universities of U.S.A.'

The President of the American Irish Historical Society of New York, James McGurrian, published a letter on the subject of Celtic Studies in the *Irish Times*, dated 21 June 1934. In it he quoted MacNeill's view that 'a right appreciation of Ireland's place in history disseminated in America must contribute to the cultural and spiritual upbuilding of America.' However, while lamenting the lack of chairs for Professors of Celtic Studies, he acknowledged the fact that despite this 'handicap' the growing interest in things Celtic has produced a large body of research work, 'and its highest practical expression is seen in the work of the Harvard University Archaeological Mission.' MacNeill, who was later to serve as President of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland from 1937 to 1940, had paved the way for this important cultural undertaking. This was an American scientific survey of the Celtic race which also included physical and social anthropology strands, carried out in Ireland, north and south, between the years 1932 and 1936.

The organiser of this survey was Earnest A. Hooton, a physical anthropologist at Harvard and member of the American Eugenics Society (AES), where he served as chairman of the sub-committee on anthropometry. He also served on the Committee of the Negro. One of the aims of the American Eugenics movement was to create 'an American eugenic presence throughout the world.' A 'network of eugenic investigators' was dispatched to Belgium, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Holland, Poland, Germany and the Irish Free State. Potential immigrants to the United States were 'eugenically inspected.' This agenda dovetailed neatly with that of the nationalist Irish Free State in legitimizing through science the official state identity. For an emerging European, independent nation-state prior to the Second World War being identified as a white, orthognathous, European Celt (possible an offshoot of the Aryan Race) was economically and culturally advantageous. Thousands of artefacts were recovered during the course of the five-year archaeological project by the Harvard Mission. Some of these were included in the official Irish Free State cultural package exhibited in the Travel and Transport building at the Chicago World Fair in 1934, the theme of which was 'A Century of Progress.' A historical drama entitled 'The Pageant of the Celt' was also staged at the Fair.

While the Harvard Mission was working in Ireland, an attempt was made to establish an American School of Celtic Studies at the National Museum of Ireland. In 1934, MacNeill had a discussion with the Nazi Director of the National Museum, Dr. Adolf Mahr, about this. Mahr expressed the opinion that 'all work of an archaeological character carried on under the authority of the State should be centred in the National Museum'. In 1933, Alfred Marston Tozzer, Hudson Professor of Archaeology at Harvard who had served as Director of the International School of American Archaeology in Mexico from 1914, visited the Harvard Mission excavations at Ballinderry 2 Crannóg in County Offaly to examine this possibility. Professor Fred Robinson of Harvard, who also visited the site, suggested that the Ballinderry investigators might form a nucleus of the school and help to promote co-operation between the American Universities and various Irish institutions of learning. MacNeill had met Robinson on his American tour. At that time Harvard and the Catholic University of Washington were the two institutions at the forefront of the development and promotion of Celtic Studies in the United States. MacNeill received an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University of Washington

during his visit in 1930. It was Robinson's dedicated work which resulted in the Widener Library at Harvard having a collection which included 10,000 Celtic books and by 1954 it housed the largest single collection of Celtic literary material in the world. Other American visitors to Ireland during the Harvard Mission Survey included Professor Clark H. Slover of the University of Texas who came to Dublin in 1933. He was carrying out research on the Celtic contribution to English culture. It was reported in the *Irish Times* of 24 August that the increasing interest of America in the Middle Ages was that it was recognised that it was in mediaeval Europe, rather than in classical Greece and Rome, that 'the vital constituents of modern civilisation' were found. Professor Slover expressed the desirability of establishing an American school of Irish Archaeology.

However, the various proposals by the American academics did not come to fruition. Eventually, in 1940, a School of Celtic Studies and a School of Theoretical Physics were combined in De Valera's modernist project - the Institute for Advanced Studies in Dublin. A decision was made not to include archaeology as a subject under Celtic Studies for political reasons. De Valera's ambition was that the institute would be a World Centre for Celtic Studies and modelled it on the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton.