

CELTOPHOBIA

Well into the 20th century, historians taught that the Celts arrived in Ireland around 500 BCE. Sometimes, this was described as invasion or migration, and in one or more waves. It was not then clear what happened to the aboriginal population and whether or not it died out, was eliminated or just absorbed.

In recent decades, this scenario has been challenged on various grounds.

First of all, some archaeologists have told us that there is little or no trace of Celtic intrusion or intrusions.

Then a number of scholars came up with DNA research which seemed to indicate that there was no great influx of Celts in the period concerned and that the aboriginal population continued to dominate demographically up to and beyond 500 BCE.

Next, some writers alleged that the current widespread use of the term Celt (deriving from the Greek *κελτοί* as used by Hecataeus in 517 BCE) only became established in the 18th century and that Celts in Europe or in Ireland did not so describe themselves.



A major question which remained was that of how Ireland came to be exclusively Gaelic speaking and with a Gaelic culture and indeed a certain all-Ireland Gaelic consciousness, as evidenced in various lines of research. For example, the Gaelic word for a province came to be *cúige* (fifth), which obviously implied a whole (the island) consisting of five parts. It was then suggested that this Gaelic cultural

hegemony was not due so much to population movement as cultural influence arising from contact with the continent.

It is not difficult to see in some of these musings an attempt to further deflate nationalism by casting doubt on the ancient Celtic origins of the Irish nation. However, the result is a racialist as distinct from a culturalist approach to nationality. In the latter case, it does not really matter what blood flows in one's veins as distinct from the cultural tradition which Ireland possesses, and suffuses the consciousness of Irish men and women today.

At the same time, a certain amount of scepticism is required in reacting to Celtophobia.

On the archaeological front, the comment by some other

archaeologists is to be borne in mind that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. One thinks here of what used to be considered the myth of Troy and what was discovered to be reality at the end of the 19th century.

In regard to DNA, its use is fairly fool-proof in dealing with the identification of contemporary murderers, but there have been scientific reservations about how much it can be relied upon in relation to human developments over thousands of years.

As for the name Celt, there is nothing unusual about a term in contemporary vogue coming to describe an ancient phenomenon wherein it was not used either to the same extent as today or at all. For example, the ancient Egyptians did not refer to themselves as Egyptian but rather as from Kumat. (At the same time, see Note below.)

In respect of language and culture, while there were no doubt influences which spread in the ancient world across geographical and national boundaries, it seems to stretch credibility to assert that these came to bear so predominantly in Ireland without significant population movement. Yet such movement need not have been overwhelming, but adequate to implant the Celtic and perhaps replace the primitive autochthonous culture of what was a small primordial insular population. In the age of mass media, we are conscious of not only continental but global influences. But we have to remember that we live in a very different age from that of ancient Ireland.

All this said, Celtophobia will no doubt continue to be promoted by hostile scholars and smart-Alec journalists whose anti-nationalism is well known. ('Coincidentally', they have come to the fore with the rise of Scottish nationalism, devolution in Wales and the rise of Sinn Féin in the North.) There may have been in the past nationalists who felt that Celtic blood was important, but nowadays it is Celtic culture which is paramount.

In summary, Ireland was predominantly Celtic in ancient times and is Celtic to this day in significant measure. To that extent, we can be proud to say that we are culturally Celts, even often via the medium of the English language, and reject a racialist interpretation of nationality.

NOTE

Gallic Wars, Julius Caesar, Book 1 (58 BCE)

Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres, quarum unam incolunt Belgae, aliam Aquitani, tertiam qui ipsorum lingua Celtae, nostra Galli appellantur.

(All Gaul is divided into three parts, one of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, the third those who in their own language are called Celts, in ours Gauls.)

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh (revised 20 Sept 2020)