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One Island, One People, One Nation: Early Latin Evidence for this Motif in Ireland

Thomas O'Loughlin

An Island Home

That the island of Ireland is the home of the Irish, and consequently that 'the nation' and the territory of the island mutually define one another, has been one of the central assumptions of Irish nationalism. Just as an island is a single discrete entity -- the very icon for something well marked off from other things by 'clear blue water' -- so the people on it have been assumed to be a distinct group. More than just a collection of individuals or families, they have been assumed to form a 'nation' with a separate identity and destiny from their neighbours. This distinction has been elaborated in several modes: culturally, linguistically, religiously, and most frequently politically; but the underlying theme is that Ireland (the island) is identical with Ireland (a cultural entity generated in the imagination: 'the place we call home'), and can be identified with its nation, the Irish (an ethnic concept/entity) and with a political expression, 'Ireland' when this is the label placed before an ambassador. This identification of the geologically distinct entity, the island, with the human structures upon it, is at the heart both of Irish nationalist argument -- the 1937 Constitution of Ireland is a pristine example -- and the great sense among many of the island's inhabitants that 'Ireland' is somehow a very identifiable entity -- there is an Irish music, an Irish sense of humour, an Irish character -- and so, consequently, that the Irish are a very homogeneous collection of people.

Here lies a can worms. For if the people are that homogeneous -- as a human entity they have a similar definable unity to that which the island they inhabit has as a physical entity -- then that group must share a common imagination about their origins, loyalties, and aspirations. And, more menacingly, those who fail to share these cultural values must be seen as invaders who, if they continue to hold these views and remain on the island, are enemies. The overlaps of ethnic and political boundaries are always, once the notion of the nation figures large in peoples' world-view, sources of struggle (witness the problems of the Albanians in the Balkans outside the state of Albania), but they become extreme in the case of islands -- for an

island state's geographical boundaries can only be re-drawn with difficulty if an area is already imagined as a unity as an island. Moreover, if the idea exists that the unity of the island is directly linked to the cultural unity of its inhabitants, then even the idea that one can draw borders within the island is tantamount to splitting up a body, cutting-off a limb, sundering an organic unity, and brings with it the mental anguish that accompanies the notion of amputation. This sense of one island, one people, and by extension that there should be one memory and one future, is well exhibited in much of the rhetoric which has been used in Ireland by 'nationalists' (i.e. those who hold Ireland is home to one nation) about those who have a different cultural affinity, the 'loyalists' (i.e. those who hold that Ireland is a place where British people live) and about the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It has been expressed in many ways over the years, and is by no means dead as an idea latent within many Irish minds, in both official and unofficial ways. For example, it can be seen in official mythology in 'the definitive series' postage stamps used from the 1920s to the late 1960s where Saorstad Éireann or Éire was identified by a map of the whole island, surrounded by sea, without any internal divisions; while it can be seen, unofficially, in the appeals to the notion of 'four green fields' which are imagined as forming a unity. If today we hear much of 'valuing diverse traditions' and 'reconciling memories', we still hear rumblings about 'not abandoning long term nationalist goals.' The appropriateness or not of such cultural/political attitudes is not my concern, rather I wish to focus on the earliest recorded expressions of that attitude of one island = one people = one nation, the reasons behind its origins as a cultural myth, and to suggest that it was transformed through its long-lived influence in Ireland.

The Island Problem: Naming From Outside

Before looking at the question of Irish self-perception as a nation we must note that while every society has an ethnic sense of identity, this question is more complicated in the case of island peoples than those who live on mainlands / continents. Almost by definition more people live on the continent than the island: the island is defined by being a 'bit' of island

separated from the land mass by sea. Thus while a geographer might tell us both Greenland and Australia are islands, this seems to offend our sense of how things are: if Australia is an island, then so is every piece of land, and the term has no meaning. We are much happier to think of Australia as a continent and it has the island of Tasmania near it. Thus the island is named by those outside it, on the continent, and its inhabitants are identified collectively as those who come from that place. Thus the Tasmanians are a sub-set of the Australians and are distinct as they come from that island marked-off by water, equally, the Tory islanders form a group for they come from a place marked-off by sea from Ireland. Islanders, because they live on a separated 'bit', are always more liable to have their identity imposed from outside on the basis of their geographical home than those who live on mainlands who are more likely to give themselves an identity on the basis of language, culture, or political allegiance. So from the continental viewpoint the Irish are simply those people who come from that distinct bit of land called Ireland. But if the inhabitants of that island do not equally identify with that externally given identity, it can lead to some funny situations, as anyone from the Republic of Ireland will know who has been grouped in Britain with non-nationalists from Northern Ireland under the term "Irish." Those from Northern Ireland often feel that their identity is threatened -- for they know that they do not share the 'one island = one nation' world-view of a nationalist -- and so they feel they must point-out that they are not-Irish, but British, and so should not be seen as a distinct group simply because they come from 'the island' not the 'mainland.'

We see this fate of islanders being thought of as single groups down through history. Virgil wrote of the Cretans: *centum urbes habitant magnas uberrima regna*¹; simultaneously recognising that the 'Cretans' were divided a hundred ways politically, but for him they formed a communality. However, the Cretans were aware that if they were internally divided on their island home, then externally they were a unity. Hence, they became the paradigm for combining their forces in the face of external threats: on Crete they fought one another; but

¹ *Aeneid* 3, 106: they inhabit one hundred great and most fruitful city kingdoms.

when anyone challenged their island home, they fought as one people. The legacy of this paradigm of unity in the face of external threat -- something the city states of mainland Greece found so difficult to achieve -- lives on in the word 'syncretism.'² And this notion that they are one people for they inhabit one island is even witnessed in the early Christian document known as 'Paul's Letter to Titus' where it cites the Cretan-Liar-Paradox in this form: 'One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons"' (1:12). While we may never decide whether this proposition is true or false, we can note that for both Cretans and non-Cretans the notion is assumed that for one island, there is one people with one culture and even a single character and set of ethical values. Around the same time, another early Christian writer, Luke in Acts, viewed the Cretans in the same manner when he noted that at the first Christian Pentecost there were representatives from 'every nation (*natio*) under heaven' (2:5) gathered in Jerusalem to hear the preaching of the apostles, and among these national groups was some Cretans (2:11). We shall have to return to this early Christian image later, but for now we should simply note that for Luke Crete, the island, held one distinct *nation*, the Cretans.

Naming 'The Irish'

This process also occurred in the case of Ireland in ancient Greek and Latin writings: geographers and generals described the island's location, sometimes some features of its geography, and named its inhabitants as a single group: the Irish (*Hibernici* or *Scotti*).³ But while Ptolemy noted that there were several different tribes on the island, he was equally assertive that they collectively formed a single ethnic group.⁴ This external identification of the island's inhabitants as a single people is also central to those texts with which Irish history begins. Prosper of Aquitaine recorded an instance of papal interest in the fate of Irish

² Our noun is borrowed from the Late Latin *syncretismus* based, ultimately, on the Greek verb *syncretizein* = to join forces in the way the Cretans do.

³ All the classical reference to Ireland and its inhabitants have recently been gathered together and analysed by P. Freeman in *Ireland and the Classical World* (University of Texas Press, Austin TX 2001).

⁴ Freeman, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-84 for the text of Ptolemy and a study of its evidence.

Christians from 431 and the island's inhabitants are seen as a single group: the *Scotti*; and he adds elsewhere that they -- he treats the Irish as a race with a single character -- were barbarians.⁵ Moreover, it has recently been argued that there was concern with this people (referred to as a single entity: a *gens*) beyond the fringe of the Roman empire as a part of papal policy in the fifth century, that all the nations (*gentes*) might hear the gospel first preached to a gathering on nations at Pentecost (Acts 2) and thus every nation throughout the whole earth might find its appointed place in the divine plan of history.⁶ Even if Pope Leo the Great did not have Ireland in mind in that sermon, it is at least clear that he thought of peoples by region: one geographical area, one nation.

This same manner of thinking is found in our greatest fifth-century source: the writings of Patrick. While modern readers may think of Patrick as synonymous with all things Irish, he not only thought of himself as a Roman from Britain, but as someone dwelling as a stranger in an alien land suffering the loss of his family and people.⁷ Despite knowing the people, and appreciating that there was no political unity on the island (see *Confessio* 52⁸), he thinks of Ireland as one island with one people. In his vocation dream he hears 'the voice of the Irish' (*Hiberionacum*) calling him back to them (*Confessio* 23) and he considers his Christians as being Irish (*Hiberionaci* -- *Epistola* 16). Elsewhere he refers to the people as *Scotti*: a woman from the island is a *Scotta* (*Confessio* 42), and they have children (*Confessio* 41) and allies (*Epistola* 2 and 12). But if he, as an outsider writing in the ecumenical-language, thinks collectively as the island's inhabitants as 'Irish', he does not, significantly, think of them as a nation, a *gens*, i.e. as one of the ethnic unities which Christians of the time believed were scattered over the earth. Patrick, while he saw himself as the preacher on the earth's bounds, did not believe he was sent to 'the Irish nation' but to preach to the Irish nations: *ego*

⁵ See T. O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World, and God in the Earliest Irish Writings* (London 2000), pp. 25-6.

⁶ Cf. T. Charles-Edwards, 'Palladius, Prosper, and Leo the Great: Mission and Primatial Authority' in D.N. Dumville, *et al.*, eds, *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493-1993* (Woodbridge 1993), pp. 1-12.

⁷ This theme is explored in detail in T. O'Loughlin, 'Patrick on the Margins of Space and Time' in K. McGroarty ed., *Eklogai: Studies in Honour of Thomas Finan and Gerard Watson* (Maynooth 2001), pp. 44-58.

⁸ The translation I am using is my own: *St Patrick: the Man and his Works* (London 1999).

*ueneram as Hibernas gentes euangelium praedicare (Confessio 37).*⁹ There were several peoples on the island -- each (presumably) led by one of the 'petty kings' (*reguli*) he mentions¹⁰ -- and since he believed Christ commanded that each nation had to hear the gospel (Mt 28:19), Patrick had to move from nation to nation within the island to carry out his task. The minimum we should take from Patrick's evidence is this: while from outside the Irish were a single nation, in their own perception -- and Patrick would have learned this as he moved from group to group -- they were not. To the outsider, any island population forms a unity and there is little need for further precision: they can be viewed as a nation without further ado; only those who live on the island know that it is more complex.

The Irish Naming Themselves

So, can we determine when the inhabitants of Ireland began to think of themselves as a single nation? The most obvious answer is to assume that as Irish people travelled abroad they adopted the identity given them, and this in turn led to a unified identity as the islanders from that island. We know that when abroad they were so identified with the label: *Scottus*. And, from the ninth century we have the sparkling linguistic game played by the theologian Johannes Scottus Eriugena to refer to his homeland. Named John (Iohannes), when he went abroad he got the designation *Scottus* -- which had undertones of inferiority when used in some Frankish circles. He, probably in reply, took the Irish name for Ireland, *Ériu*, and used it to imitate Virgil's *Graiu gena*¹¹ creating *Eriugena* (literally: born of Ireland): thus putting classical Greece and contemporary Ireland on par! However, we can locate a far more deliberate attempt to present the Irish to themselves as a single nation in a work from the last decades of the seventh century: Muirchú's *Vita Patricii*.¹²

⁹ See the comments on this verse's significance within Patrick's text in my translation and in 'Patrick on the Margins of Space and Time'.

¹⁰ *Confessio* 41 and *Epistola* 12.

¹¹ See *Aeneid* 3, 550: 'born of Greece'.

¹² I am using the edition by L. Bieler in *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979), pp. 62-123;

The background to Muirchú's understanding is the notion of the 'nation' (*gens*) as Christians in the period read of 'nations' in their scriptures. As they read them, the history of the period awaiting Christ, and the time of redemption (the Christian era) could be seen in terms of the history of units called 'nations.' After the Flood, God had scattered the descendants of Noah by nations and given each an appointed place on the earth (Gen 10). For Muirchú, all the nations in Europe were ultimately descended from Japheth (Gen 10:5). From these, God chose one nation, Israel, as his own which would act as an 'advance party' for the coming of the Christ. This 'chosen nation' would be set in the midst of the nations (Ezek 5:5) who did not yet know the true God and his plans (e.g. Deut 18:9). When the chosen people were unfaithful they were punished by these nations and scattered among them (e.g. Lev 26:33). Yet it would be from Jerusalem, the centre-point and capital of the nation, that the full message would go forth to the nations (Mic 4:2), and eventually all the nations would be gathered to Jerusalem to recognise the final purposes of God (Joel 3:2). Now this period of preparation was over, and the story of the nations was taking a new, definitive, turn: the gospel which Christ said had to be witnessed before the nations (Mt 24:14), and preached to every nation (Mt 28:19), was spreading out from Jerusalem, to the territory of the Jewish nation, and then to the lands of all nations out to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The nations were going to be gathered into one (Mt 25:32) and the baptised, collectively, would form one 'chosen holy race and people' (*genus electum ... gens sancta*: 1 Pet 2:9). It is with this Christian identity -- focused on a notion of nations as God-given realities in the whole plan of the universe -- that Muirchú approaches the story of the conversion of his own nation: the Irish.¹³

When Muirchú looked back on Irish history he had few sources (Prosper's references to Ireland and Patrick's own writings), but several certainties: first, the island had been converted to Christianity; and second, the spread of the gospel did not occur in any haphazard way, but according to a definite historical blueprint ('divine providence') visible in the

¹³ To set Muirchú in context, see T. O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, ch. 5: 'Muirchú: Dramatist or Theologian?'

scriptures. Upon these certainties he built his picture of Patrick with his historical sources providing the incidental colour. The missionary plan he envisaged operated like this. Each nation received the gospel from an apostle for they were charged to go out to the nations situated right out to the very ends of the earth. At this point, he either considered that this land, Ireland, was a unity, so requiring just one apostle; or, his knowledge of the history was such that he believed the Patrick was alone in bringing Christianity to Ireland. Either way, the lynch-pin of his argument was this: Ireland received only one apostle, therefore it is a single land with a single people. The long tradition that Patrick is ‘the apostle of Ireland’ who single-handedly converted the island is a direct legacy of Muirchú’s work. If Ireland had one apostle, then the preparation for the reception of the gospel on the island (this Christians saw as the hidden work of the Holy Spirit working among the nations to dispose them to receive the message of Christ) must have been on a island-wide basis implying that the island had only one nation dwelling upon it. This is exactly what Muirchú then demonstrates to his audience. They were a single people with a single king (whom he refers to as the *imperator barbarorum*), with a unified nobility stretching over the whole country (how far this is from reality can be seen in that for the list of nobility he borrows from the Book of Daniel¹⁴ rather than attempting to find equivalents to Irish terms), and they have a single priesthood (again borrowed from scripture¹⁵). This united empire made up of provinces share a single language -- this is the first use of the Irish language as a marker of national identity -- and as a people had a unified body of prophesy written in that language which foretold the coming of Christ to their island. This collection of books is explicitly invoked by Muirchú an analogue of the scriptures which the Jewish priesthood working at Herod’s court could consult on the coming of Christ in their land (Mt 2:1-6). Muirchú’s message is plain: just as the Jews were *par excellence* a single nation with a divinely-appointed place in the divine providence God

¹⁴ I have examined Muirchú’s use of Daniel in ‘Reading Muirchú’s Tara-event within its background as a biblical “trial of divinities”’ in J. Cartwright ed., *Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults*, forthcoming.

¹⁵ This fact is so annoying to those with a ‘New age’ interest in things ‘Celtic’ who wish for a great system of ‘druids’ that they usually ignore the fact that Muirchú has no information on pre-Christian religion in Ireland, and his whole picture of Ireland before Patrick is based on a Christian reading of a late Jewish caricature of the nature of paganism in Babylon. On the historical silliness of those who pursue ‘ancient Celtic druids’, see D.E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh 2000).

leading to the Christ, so the Irish *as a nation* had a place in that same providence.

This nation, the Irish, had a single destiny in the future as it had a single origin in the past, and single king and capital -- Tara -- in the present (i.e. in Patrick's time which Muirchú dates as 432¹⁶). The advent of Patrick would change -- so the pagan priesthood prophesy -- Ireland and its people (one identified with the other) forever. So unified is this nation that they have a island-wide liturgy (each year the king lights a single fire from which all the households derive their fire) which although pagan is part of the divine plan for it takes place on exactly the same night as the Christians light the fire for the liturgy of Christ that is at the very centre of all Christian worship: the Easter Vigil. Then comes the moment, which in Muirchú's perspective, his nation's whole ancient history was leading to: when his nation would be baptised in the first Christian night of baptism 'in our land' -- Patrick's Easter Vigil. Then in a great contest between the priesthood of the Irish nation and the priesthood of the Christian nation, the fate of Ireland was decided: the king accepted baptism and his *gens* joined the *gens sancta* of the baptised.¹⁷ In effect, the notion of one island, one nation was created by Muirchú to fit his Christian theological vision of the place of 'nations' within the providential spread of God's message.

Muirchú's Influence

These theological themes of the baptism of 'nations' and of 'nations in God's providence' are strange to our ears because -- rhetorical references to 'Christendom' or 'the Christian nations' apart -- they no longer form part of mainstream Christian theology. Indeed, they have not been part of Latin academic theology since the scholastics and, consequently, most readers of Muirchú have not even noticed their presence, much less recognised their centrality to his argument. However, in Muirchú's time the place he ascribed to 'nations' in the providence of evangelisation was a standard element within Christian theology -- one can find it earlier in

¹⁶ This classic date in Irish tradition is another legacy of Muirchú.

¹⁷ For a study of Muirchú's theology of baptism, see my 'Mission in Early Ireland: the example of Muirchú's Life of Patrick' in M. Atherton ed., *Celts and Christians*, forthcoming.

Gregory of Tours' account of the conversion of the Franks and later in Bede's account of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons.

But if Muirchú's theological vision has disappeared, the vision which he produced, in its light, of Patrick has become a fixed element in Irish portrayals of their own identity. By adopting Patrick as their great patron, a process in which Muirchú played a central role, they adopted Patrick as 'the apostle of the nation,' and the nation's self-identity is that of the people of the whole island destined to have their future transformed by Patrick's baptism. But for these later readers of Muirchú, the entity of 'the Irish nation' perdured through that baptism, being simply altered to 'the Christian Irish nation.' Although the providential aspect was forgotten, the notion that Patrick was the converter of the whole island remained. So whenever Patrick was invoked as an element of Irish self-identification in umpteen rituals, processions, parades, and re-tellings of the Patrick-storyline,¹⁸ at the same time the notion that the island is home to a single nation was *de facto* invoked and renewed. Muirchú wrote to create a sense of a baptised people who, as such, had a place in the history of salvation. In this action one 'of the nations' scattered over the earth ceased to be a isolated, distinct body stemming from the beginning of the 'Second Age' (after Noah's Flood),¹⁹ and became part of the universal 'elect nation' (i.e. the Christian Church) of the Last Days, the Final Age. Yet, in being the major originator of the later Patrick legend in Ireland, Muirchú contributed to the creation of an image of the Irish nation as indestructible in its distinctiveness in any age, and to the creation of that potent simplicity of one island, one nation, one identity. Can one think of another Irish writer whose historical impact is so much at variance with his original intention!

¹⁸ Muirchú's *uita* forms the basis for the whole later legend of Patrick, and was used even in scholarly writings on Patrick until the c. 1960, see D.A. Binchy, 'Patrick and his Biographers, Ancient and Modern,' *Studia Hibernica* 2(1962)7-173; and T. O'Loughlin, 'St Patrick and an Irish Theology,' *Doctrine and Life* 44(1994)153-9.

¹⁹ On the consciousness of the 'Ages' of Creation as developed by Augustine of Hippo in early Christian Ireland, see D. Ó Cróinín, *The Irish Sex Aetates Mundi* (Dublin 1983), pp. 1-11.