

ANTIQUARINISM

Until the late 18th century the word *antiquarianism* meant the study of ancient cultures and civilization specifically, and mainly referred to those of Greece and Rome. That Ireland would have been excluded up to this point from such lofty company makes historical and political sense. Its indigenous culture did not constitute a “civilization” by the standards of most British or continental European classicists and scholars, more often it was characterized as barbarous, as in the well circulated and repeatedly cited writings of Edmund Spenser and Giraldus Cambrenis. All of this changed, however when a retired British General, Charles Vallancey, began his foundational work in the recovery, interpretation, and promotion of Irish antiquities, that Vallancey was completely wrong about almost every assertion he made concerning ancient Ireland, and especially the Irish Language, is not nearly as important as his act of valorizing native Irish Culture. Although his work, which was published in serial form (alongside the work of others) in *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis* (1770-1804), was full of “fantastic speculations and etymological solecisms,” as Josep Leersen writes, it was of immense political value to an emerging strand of Irish nationalism in the last decades of the 18th century. And so Irish antiquarianism has its roots in the enthusiasm of an amateur who could bestow upon it respectability and political significance, if not philological accuracy.

Charles Vallancey was the main force behind the establishment of a Dublin Society select committee on the study of antiquities in May, 1772. One of this members, Sir Lucius O’Brien, would invite the prominent Catholic advocate Charles O’Conor to become a member in a letter that included the following formulation of its purpose: “if our Researches shall turn out of any service to the public or of any Honor to Ireland; If by shewing that the inhabitants of this Islands were at all times respectable & often the Masters & more often the Instructors of Britain we can convince our neighbors that, although providence has at present given them superior strength, yet ought they not to treat the Irish as a Barbarous, Or a Contemptible People” (cited in Leersen 1997, pp. 347-348). This political objective was later more fully articulated by others, including O’Conor, and it forms the basis for an apolitical

Nationalism which asserts that the Irish deserve better treatment because they are the inheritors of a civilization older and richer than that of Britain. Arguably, this is one of the rhetorical bases from which Daniel O'Connell made the case for Catholic Emancipation four decades later. Such a model also paved the way for the familiar analogical linking of Ireland with Greece and Britain with Rome by the Irish Literary Revival. Not to mention Matthew Arnold's related characterization in "On the Study of Celtic Literature."

Foundational as it was for so many political, social and literary modes of thinking, antiquarianism consolidated into its most influential institutional forms in the two decades before the union. The successor to the Dublin Society select committee was the Hibernian Antiquarianism Society (HAS), which sustained itself from 1779 to 1783. In 1882, just before the demise of the HAS, Vallancey confounded the Royal Irish Academy, setting as one of its aims the recovery and study of Irish antiquities. With the establishment of the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) came a flood of interest in Irish antiquarianism from both Irish nationalist and unionist quarters. The founding of the RIA meant new respectability and prestige for studies like Vallancey's. That Vallancey or the arguments surrounding his "strange researches," in Seamus Deane's words remained central to these institutions was affirmed when the eminent Irish nationalist Henry Flood bequeathed a chair of Irish philology at Trinity College, Dublin, for him following terms: "if he shall be then living, Colonel Charles Vallancey to be the first professor thereof seeing that by his eminent and successful labors in the study and recover of that language he well deserves to be so first appointed" (cited in Leersen 1997, pp. 362). The support and celebrity that Vallancey inspired is further evidenced in letter that O'Connor, his close associate, wrote to colleagues and activists. O'Connor praised him in the highest terms, as for example, in a letter of 1786 to Joseph Walker: "the extent of his oriental learning and skill in modern languages is vast. In my last to him, I ventured to predict that his last performance will draw on him the attention of all the academics of Europe..." (O'Connor 1980, pp. 471). "Attention" is one way to put it debunking, cynical attacks is more accurate. Vallancey's work sparked a fierce debate over the origins of the Irish (a debate that echoed and derived from that which took place over

James Macpherson's Ossianic "translation"). Vallancey's most important contribution to Irish antiquarianism was his assertion without any reliable evidence and without even a basic knowledge of the Irish language that Irish was a language derivative of ancient Phoenician. This claim was attended by his assertion against without evidence of the ancient Carthaginian origins of the Irish people. (Carthage, of course, was located in North Africa. for a helpful map charting Vallancey's speculations). These two claims won widespread approval from a broad range of camps. Even James Joyce, lecturing to a university audience in Trieste in 1907, would cite Vallancey as a respected authority. Writing in 1907, Joyce explained the origins of the Irish language in this way: "this language is eastern in origin and has been identified by many philologists with the ancient language of the Phoenicians, the discoverers, according to historians of commerce and navigation.... The language that the comic dramatist Plautus pouts in the mouth of the Phoenicians in his comedy *Poemula* is virtually the same language, according to the critic Vallancey, as that which Irish peasants now speak" (Joyce 2000, pp. 110). This was neither true nor even demonstrable, but as Joyce's adoption of this theory indicated, it found a broad and enduring base of support.

The persistence of Vallancey's credibility is a treatment not to his academics assiduity but rather to the necessities of certain forms of cultural nationalism, such as the kind that Joyce would articulate in Trieste. Vallancey's unprovable, "speculating and mystifying" ideas (in Leersen's words) about Irish origins would have consequences beyond enabling apologetics strands of nationalism, however. The reaction to his work, as enshrined in Edward Ledwich's *Antiquities of Ireland* (2nd edition, 1804) formed the basis of 19th century Irish antiquarianism and set the standard for the early 19th century division of the subjects encompassed by antiquarianism into formal for the early 20th century division of the subjects encompassed by antiquarianism into formal categories such as history, archaeology, linguistics and physical anthropology. The *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* became a forum in which to continue this reaction and the debates surroundings Vallancey's assertions. At the same time, as Seamus Deane has observed, the special section in the *Proceedings* on antiquities became a place where "amateur scholars like Charles O'Connor and Edmund Ledwige and politicians

like Sir Lawrence Parsons all brought some offering to the new shrine of cultural nationalism, where the new gods of Language and of War presided, converting the old accusations of crudeness in speech and turbulence into symptoms of natural spontaneity and of valor” (Deane 1986, pp. 62).

References :

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