ISSN 1753-2396 (Print)
ISSN 2753-328X (Online)

Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

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Volume 3, Issue 1
Pp: 121-137
2009
Published on: 1st Jan 2009

1495
ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Celticism, Catholicism and Colonialism: The Intellectual Frontiers of Thomas D'Arcy McGee

David A. Wilson

In August 1850, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a Young Ireland exile living in Boston, penned what became one of the best-known poems of the Irish diaspora, 'A Salutation to the Celts'–a celebration of the unity and glory of a scattered and despised people, with its oft-quoted first verse:

> Hail to the Celtic brethren, wherever they may be
> In the far woods of Oregon, or o'er the Atlantic sea–
> Whether they guard the banner of St George in Indian vales
> Or spread beneath the nightless North experimental sails,
> One in name, and in fame
> Are the world-divided Gaels.[1]

The poem was published in the first issue of McGee's latest publishing venture, the *American Celt*. 'In choosing the name this paper bears,' he explained, 'we meant to adopt the opposite side of a popular theory, namely: that all modern civilization and intelligence–whatever is best and most vital in modern society, came in with the Saxons or Anglo-Saxons.' Against this view, and to foster a 'decent self-respect' among the Irish in America, McGee asserted the values of the Celts–'a People brave, zealous for liberty, jealous of religious rites, capable of the highest discipline, and wielding the divinest powers of mind.'[2]

The central purpose of this paper is to discuss McGee's construction of a reactive Celticism as a unifying myth for the world-divided Irish, and the way in which that Celticism intersected with two other central themes in nineteenth-century Ireland and beyond, Catholicism and colonialism. In doing so, I would like to move beyond the view of historians such as Noel Ignatiev that Irish immigrants to the United States asserted their own

[1] *American Celt*, 31 August 1850. In later versions of the poem, 'world-divided Gaels' became 'sea-divided Gaels'; see Mary Ann Sadlier (ed.), *The Poems of Thomas D'Arcy McGee* (New York, 1869), 135 – 6.

[2] *American Celt*, 31 August 1850.

'whiteness' as a means of dissociating themselves from simian stereotypes and being accepted into mainstream American society. Such an interpretation rests on doubtful assumptions and dubious logic, and fails the test of Occam's Razor; the 'simianized Irish' image has been exaggerated on both sides of the Atlantic, the Irish never saw themselves as anything but white, and there are more comprehensible reasons for Irish racism towards Afro-Americans, such as competition for jobs and houses, and a conviction that American national unity should not be jeopardised by campaigns for the abolition of slavery.[3] Moreover, the focus on 'whiteness' has shifted attention from the much more important question of how the Irish came to racialise themselves as Celts, and what that meant in practice. In McGee's case, it meant exploring new frontiers, in both an intellectual and geographical sense – moving from liberalism to ultramontanism, and from radical Irish nationalism to enlightened British imperialism, as he travelled through the North Atlantic triangle of Ireland, the United States and Canada.

I Personal 'Frontiers'

Although he is largely forgotten today, McGee was a household name in the mid-nineteenth-century Irish-American-Canadian triangle of the Irish diaspora. Born in Carlingford in 1825, and raised near Cushendall (in County Antrim) and then in Wexford, McGee was well known as a journalist, poet, orator, historian and politician. In 1844, two years after he and his sister had emigrated from Wexford, he became the editor of America's leading Irish-American newspaper, the *Boston Pilot*; he was nineteen years old and had already written his first book, with another one on the way. Returning to Ireland in 1845, he became the parliamentary correspondent for the O'Connellite *Freeman's Journal*, and a journalist with the Young Ireland newspaper *The Nation*. After the failure of the Rising of 1848, he escaped to the United States, where for

[3] The 'whiteness' interpretation is most closely associated with Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995). On the subsequent debate, see Peter Kolchin, 'Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America', *Journal of American History*, 89 (2002), 154 – 73, and Eric Arneson, 'Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (2001), 3 – 32. See also the brief but devastatingly funny comments of Roy Foster, 'How the Short Stories Became Novels', in his *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change, 1970 – 2000* (London, 2007), 149. For my thoughts on the subject, see David A. Wilson, 'Whiteness and the Irish Experience in North America', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), 153 – 60.

the next two years he edited the New York *Nation*; in 1850, he started up the *American Celt* in Boston – a newspaper that he moved to Buffalo from 1852 – 3, and to New York during the mid 1850s. When in 1857 he left the United States for Canada, he continued his newspaper career as the editor of the *New Era* in Montreal. By the time he became a Member of Parliament for Montreal in 1857, and subsequently folded the *New Era* to focus on his political career, McGee had established a reputation as one of the most talented journalists in the Irish diaspora.

Equally striking was his reputation as a poet. McGee published his first poem at the age of fourteen – a paean of praise to Father Mathew's temperance campaign and an ironic prelude to McGee's subsequent serial alcoholism.[4] Later in the century, Samuel Ferguson would come to describe McGee as 'the greatest poet of them all' among the Young Irelanders (in a field that included James Clarence Mangan), while Charles Gavan Duffy regarded McGee's historical poems as the best in Ireland.[5] By modern standards, his poetry does not hold up. But his best poetry was embedded in his speeches, which have remarkable emotive and intellectual power, and which still have the capacity to grip and engage when read aloud.

McGee's contemporaries generally regarded him as one of the greatest orators – for some, *the* greatest – of his generation; there are countless testimonies, from allies and enemies alike, of his brilliance as a public speaker. Consider, for example, the reminiscences of Sandford Fleming, the Scottish Canadian who not only served as Chief Engineer of the Canadian Pacific Railway, but also brought us Standard Time. During the winter of 1861 – 2, Fleming was waiting for McGee to speak at a packed St Lawrence Hall in Toronto. The train from Montreal had been delayed, and the crowd was getting impatient. Suddenly, a man wrapped in a buffalo coat strode onto the platform. 'The first impression was anything but pleasant', wrote Fleming. 'Those around me thought that the uncouth looking person was a cab-man who had rushed on the stage to make known some dire calamity which had happened to Mr McGee.' 'All this was dispelled so soon as the unknown individual spoke a few sentences', he continued. 'It was the silver tongued McGee himself who charmed all present by his eloquence.'[6]

[4] *Wexford Independent*, 11 April 1840.

[5] Lady Mary Catherine Ferguson, *Sir Samuel Ferguson in the Ireland of His Day* (2 vols, Edinburgh and London, 1896), I, 139; Charles Gavan Duffy, *My Life in Two Hemispheres* (2 vols, London, 1898), I, 128 n.

[6] Sandford Fleming to Henry Morgan, 15 April 1895, Library and Archives Canada, Henry Morgan Papers, MG29 D61, ff. 5244 – 5.

And then there was his historical writing, which was enormously influential during the nineteenth century. McGee's *History of the Irish Settlers in North America* (1851)—which could easily have been entitled 'How the Irish Saved North American Civilisation'—was the first history of the Irish in America and pioneered a long historiographical and hagiographical tradition dedicated to popularising Irish achievements in the United States.[7] His *Popular History of Ireland* (1863), which took him five years to write, became a major influence on Alexander Martin Sullivan's *Story of Ireland* (1867) and was still being read in early twentieth-century Irish classrooms.[8] It is worth noting that the younger McGee anticipated Kerby Miller's argument about the sense of Irish alienation and 'exile' in the United States.[9] 'We are a primitive people', he wrote in 1849, 'wandering wildly in a strange land, the Nineteenth Century.'[10] Yet he later rejected the notion of exile, and adopted a position that beat Donald Harman Akenson to the punch by well over a century in arguing that most Irish-Catholic Canadians lived in the countryside, that their single most important occupation was farming, and that they were much better off economically, socially, politically and religiously than their counterparts in the United States.[11]

Above all, though, McGee was known as one of the most important—and unquestionably one of the most controversial—political figures in Ireland and North America. Against the background of famine and revolution in Ireland, immigration and nativism in the United States, and ethno-religious conflict and nation-building in Canada, his career moved through four different phases, each of which corresponded with a major component of nineteenth-century ideology—constitutional nationalism (before and after the Young Ireland Rising of 1848), revolutionary republicanism (in Ireland in 1848, and in the United States until the spring of 1849), ultramontanism (in the United States during the early 1850s), and liberal-conservatism (in Canada after 1857).

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[7] Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A History of the Irish Settlers in North America, From the Earliest Period to the Census of 1850* (1851; 6th edition, Boston, 1855).

[8] Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A Popular History of Ireland, From the Earliest Period to the Emancipation of the Catholics* (Montreal, 1863).

[9] Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York, 1985).

[10] *Nation* [Dublin], 1 September 1849.

[11] See, for example, *American Celt*, 31 December 1853, 29 April 1854, 4 August 1855, 11 August 1855; Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *The Irish Position in British and in Republican North America* (Montreal, 1866), 13. Cf. Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Montreal and Kingston, 1984), and Donald Harman Akenson, *Being Had: Historians, Evidence and the Irish in North America* (Port Credit, 1993), 37 – 107.

The career of McGee is, in some ways, analogous to that of the twentieth-century author, scholar and diplomat Conor Cruise O'Brien. Both men were first-rate writers and formidable polemicists who lived by their wits. They both rejected their early nationalism to become conservative admirers of Edmund Burke; indeed, McGee's interpretation of Burke prefigures many of the arguments advanced in O'Brien's biography of Burke, *The Great Melody* (1992).[12] And they both emerged as uncompromising opponents of revolutionary Irish republicanism, with each becoming known in his own time as England's favourite Irishman. Nor is it coincidental that O'Brien and McGee should have been subjected to virtually identical attacks. Both were accused of being more interested in winning arguments than in seeking the truth, of being able and willing to make a speech on either side of any question, of adopting a confrontational approach that was ultimately counterproductive, and of drinking to excess. There were, of course, significant differences between the two men, not least in the area of religion; O'Brien was an agnostic, while McGee became a devout Catholic. And while O'Brien outlived numerous republican death threats, McGee manifestly did not.

This brings us to the last thing for which McGee was well known, namely his assassination on an Ottawa street on the night of 6 – 7 April 1868, a week before his forty-third birthday. By that time, the revolutionary of 1848 had become a Liberal-Conservative cabinet minister, a father of Canadian Confederation, and one of the most articulate advocates of a 'new Canadian nationality' characterised by unity-in-diversity, mutual respect, minority rights and balancing British order with American liberty.[13] His assassination, at the hands of a man with strong Fenian sympathies, turned him into 'a martyr to British Loyalty' and 'Canada's martyred Celt'.[14] McGee's funeral brought

[12] Compare Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke* (Chicago, 1992), with McGee's approach to Burke in *Boston Pilot*, 23 August 1845; *American Celt*, 20 December 1851; *True Witness* [Montreal], 9 December 1853, 21 November 1856; *New Era*, 26 September, 3 October, 6 October 1857; and Thomas D'Arcy McGee, *A History of the Attempts to Establish the Protestant Reformation in Ireland, and the Successful Resistance of That People* (Boston, 1853), 190, 251 – 2.

[13] See, for example, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, 'The Future of Canada' in *New Era*, 22 October 1857. See also, *Ottawa Citizen*, 1 December 1863.

[14] William Forster to John A. Macdonald, 14 April 1868, Library and Archives Canada, John A. Macdonald Papers, MG26A, vol. 341, C1709, ff. 155944 – 7; Ewyn Bruce Mackinnon to Charles Murphy, n.d. [February – March 1925], Library and Archives Canada, Charles Murphy Papers, MG27 III B8, ff. 18243 – 45.

80,000 people onto the streets of Montreal, and has only been surpassed in Canada by those of George-Etienne Cartier, Pierre Elliott Trudeau and the hockey player Maurice 'Rocket' Richard.[15] But if McGee was on the right side of Canadian history, he was on the wrong side of Irish nationalism. 'In reading his book of poems,' wrote the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, 'I find a few verses where he prays for a dog's death should he ever desert the cause of Ireland; he did desert it, and a dog's death he got.'[16] And that is the single most important reason why hardly anyone outside Irish Canada now knows of Thomas D'Arcy McGee. He was 'unsound on the national question', and was quietly but effectively written out of Irish and Irish-American history.

II Celtic 'Frontiers'

Yet McGee's career repays careful investigation, not least because of its relationship to the larger diasporic themes of Celticism, Catholicism and colonialism. As we now know, the Celts arrived in Britain and Ireland in 1707 through the pages of Edward Lhuyd's *Archaeologia Britannica*, and became a medium through which people who had been denigrated as primitive speakers of obscure languages could re-imagine themselves as heirs of a great and glorious civilisation that had once towered over Europe.[17] To identify oneself as a Celt was to invert negative stereotypes of savagery and superstition, and to assert the self-worth and superiority of traditional Welsh, Scottish, Cornish and Irish culture against English or American cultural arrogance.[18]

As a young man in the United States, McGee found such positive images appealing, attractive and useful. During the early 1840s, he countered American nativism by connecting the Irish with a magnificent Celtic past, as well as contending that the Celts were inherently republican and anti-imperialist. In

[15] For a brief discussion of McGee's funeral in the general context of nineteenth-century parades, see Peter G. Goheen, 'Symbols in the Streets: Parades in Victorian Urban Canada', *Urban History Review*, 18 (1990), 237 – 43.

[16] *Irish World*, 2 February 1878.

[17] Edward Lhuyd, *Archaeologia Britannica, Giving Some Account Additional to What Has Been Hitherto Publish'd of the Languages, Histories, and Customs of the Original Inhabitants of Great Britain: From Collections and Observations in Travels through Wales, Cornwal [sic], Bas-Bretagne, Ireland and Scotland* (Oxford, 1707).

[18] See Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (New York, 1992) and Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London, 1999).

this reading of history, the Anglo-Saxons were addicted to monarchy and conquest, while the 'Celtic spirit' was 'too proud, restless and intelligent in the masses, to bear with willingness the rule of kings.' 'The more truly Irish or Celtic we are,' he asserted, 'the more truly republican we must be, and consequently the more American.'[19] It was the kind of argument that an Irish Catholic looking for acceptance in the United States would want to cheer home.

But as McGee's circumstances and attitudes changed, so too did his concept of the Celts; McGee's Celts assumed a concertina-like quality, in which the meaning of the term was expanded and contracted according to the melody that he was playing. In his effort to establish a united Irish front against American nativism during the early 1840s, he defined Celtic as Irish minus the Orange Order. As a Young Irelander, however, he narrowed the definition in the service of pluralistic nationalism, arguing that the Celts were only one 'race' among many within the Irish population and that the Irish should define themselves instead by their common cultural heritage.[20]

Although this argument fitted perfectly with the ecumenicalism of Young Ireland, it could not withstand the shock of 1848, when the failure of the revolutionary movement exposed the persistence of deep divisions within the Irish people. Back in the United States, this time as a republican refugee, McGee expanded the concertina once again; his Celts now embraced everyone in Ireland, including the 'Scotch-Irish' (and, by implication, the Orange Order), whether they wanted to be embraced or not. Reacting against comments in London newspapers that the Celts were 'white savages', McGee countered that they were actually the 'original inhabitants of Europe', adding for good measure Charles Gavan Duffy's statement that Cicero and Michael Angelo were 'Celts with the *O* at the wrong end of their name.'[21]

This position failed to blunt 'Anglo-Saxon' attacks that equated the Celts with Irish Catholics, and which portrayed them as ignorant, superstitious and backward peasants. Under these circumstances, McGee drew in his lines of defence and prepared for battle. 'A state of social hostility exists between citizens of Saxon and Celtic origin in the old Atlantic states', he declared in 1851. Neutrality was out of the question; the Irish were indeed Celts, the Celts were indeed Catholics, and they must break the Anglo-Saxon conspiracy before it broke them. 'Catholicism', he asserted, 'is the mark of the Celtic

[19] *Boston Pilot*, 8 February 1845.
[20] *Nation* [Dublin], 19 September, 28 November 1846, 9 January 1847.
[21] *Nation* [New York], 9 December 1848; *American Celt*, 4 January 1851.

nations, and in proportion to their purity from admixture is their loyalty in faith.'[22]

As long as McGee viewed Irish Catholics as an embattled minority fighting for survival in a hostile American environment, this image of the Celt would prevail. But when he moved to Canada, the prospect of uniting different ethno-religious groups within a common national framework meant that the politics of ethnic reaction gave way to an emphasis on harmony, compromise and cooperation. Each 'racial' group had its own distinguishing characteristics, McGee now argued; it was more important to concentrate on their different contributions to the greater good than 'to promote a dogged nationality'. 'The standard of conduct of these representatives of the Celtic element', he wrote, 'should be that God had made of one blood all the nations of the earth.'[23] In some respects, this marked a return to the position of his Young Ireland years, except of course that the Celts were now socially conservative liberals rather than radical democrats.

J.R.R. Tolkien famously wrote that '"Celtic" … is a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come.'[24] This certainly applies to McGee's use of the term, as he repeatedly redefined 'Celtic' to correspond with his changing political outlook. At various points, McGee's Celts were naturally anti-authoritarian or naturally law-abiding; they were a distinct 'race', or they were a political or linguistic grouping; they were associated with Irish Catholicism, or they embraced just about everyone in Europe; they included Irish Protestants, or they defined themselves against Irish Protestants. Beneath these different definitions lay a common cluster of images. McGee consistently described the Celts as being passionate, energetic, adventurous, courageous, spiritual, artistic and impulsive, and as a people who found it easier to begin projects than to follow them through. If his oscillating political interpretation of the Celts followed the trajectory of his career, McGee's description of the 'Celtic character' was remarkably similar to his sense of self. On both the political and the personal level, McGee had created the Celts in his own image.

This has wider significance. McGee was far from the only person who thought and felt this way, and Celticism became contested ground among other Irish people who were making their own political and personal

[22] *American Celt*, 17 May 1851, 8 January 1853.

[23] *New Era*, 9 January 1858; *True Witness* [Montreal], 12 February 1858.

[24] J.R.R. Tolkien, 'English and Welsh' in idem, *Angles and Britons: O'Donnell Lectures* (Cardiff, 1963), 29 – 30.

projections onto an imagined Celtic past and Celtic character – a vast array of individuals ranging from United Irishmen such as John Daly Burk to Young Irelanders such as John Mitchel and Thomas Davis, and Fenians such as John O'Mahony, not to mention just about everyone involved in Ireland's permanent revolution of Celtic revivals since the eighteenth century. The very act of conducting extra- and intra-Irish conflict within a Celtic framework could only contribute to the dissemination of a more general Celtic consciousness in North America. This consciousness was sufficiently vague and nebulous to encompass a wide range of contradictory concepts, while retaining generally positive connotations among its Irish adherents, almost all of whom were Catholics.

The term 'Celt' was loose enough to have a broad appeal amongst North America's Irish-Catholic immigrants, but existed in an ambiguous relationship to Irish Protestants. Such ambiguity was symptomatic of deeper dilemmas within Irish nationalism. The Protestants could be seen as an alien 'Anglo-Saxon' presence, as Celts with a false consciousness, or as Celts insofar as they were Irish nationalists. McGee at different times adopted each of these positions. But whatever the word 'Celt' meant, most (but by no means all) Irish Protestants wanted nothing to do with it. Given this situation, the concept was hardly conducive to national unity in Ireland. McGee, in common with other self-described Celts, was caught in the contradiction.

III Catholic 'Frontiers'

If McGee's Celticism intersected with his Catholicism, his relationship to religion was as complex as his relationship to 'race'. During much of his early career, McGee shared the Young Ireland view that there should be a clear line between politics and religion. 'A man may be free and a Christian at the same time', he wrote in 1849; '… in all things temporal he may assert his private judgment, and yet be an irreproachable Catholic. And, among these things temporal, I include his domestic affairs, the education of his children, his manners, his temporal opinions, and his politics.'[25] From this perspective, he could assert his intellectual independence and criticise the Church's counter-revolutionary pronouncements, while embracing its spiritual and moral teachings. As a Young Irelander, he supported non-denominational

[25] *Nation* [New York], 1 September 1849.

education and saw no contradiction between his Catholicism and his plans to study law at Trinity College in Dublin.[26] 'If Catholics cannot separate the politician from the priest', he asked, 'should we not be governed by priests? … If this be so, Theocracy, not Democracy, is the most perfect form of human government.'[27]

And yet, beneath the surface, McGee was struggling to reconcile his Catholicism with his nationalism; it was, he later wrote, his 'hardest internal battle'.[28] As an exile in New York, he had blamed the Catholic Church, along with the British government, for the failure of the Rising of 1848. In response, Bishop John Hughes of New York singled him out as a dangerous and destructive influence, and banned his newspaper, the New York *Nation*, from parish reading rooms. Conservative Catholic journalists denounced his writings as 'sources of eternal damnation to all concerned' and described him as that worst of all Catholics, a 'Protestant Catholic'.[29] Although he remained outwardly unmoved, there are signs that he was personally troubled by such attacks and was beginning to have intellectual difficulties with a compartmentalised approach to Catholicism.

What tipped the scales was the resurgence of anti-Catholicism in the United States after the Famine.[30] Because he had publicly challenged Bishop Hughes, McGee was widely admired by American Protestant liberals. But many of those liberals viewed the Catholic Church as a threat to American liberty, at the very time that American nativists and Irish-Protestant immigrants were making common cause against Catholicism in general and Irish Catholicism in particular. Meanwhile, in Britain, Lord John Russell, the leader of the Liberal party, was supporting the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill and dismissing Catholicism as full of the 'mummeries of superstition'; to many Irish Catholics, including McGee, it seemed as if the dark days of

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[26] Thomas D'Arcy McGee to Bella and Charles Morgan, 13 August 1845, Concordia University Archives, Thomas D'Arcy McGee Collection, HA 256, Folder 7.

[27] *Nation* [New York], 25 August 1849.

[28] *American Celt*, 14 April 1855.

[29] *Boston Pilot*, 2, 24 February 1849, 15 February 1851.

[30] The classic works are Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800 – 1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (1938; Gloucester, MA, 1963), and John Highham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860 – 1925* (1955; New Brunswick, NJ, 1988); the best recent study is Dale Knobel, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York, 1996). But see also Richard J. Jensen, '"No Irish Need Apply": A Myth of Urban Victimization', *Journal of Social History*, 36 (2002), 405 – 29.

the Penal Laws were returning.[31] Putting all this together, McGee became convinced that Anglo-American Protestants were waging an undeclared but very real war against Irish-Catholic Celts.[32] And, as a liberal nationalist whose newspaper was financially backed by Protestants who admired him for taking on the most important Irish Catholic bishop in America, McGee increasingly felt that he was on the wrong side of the battle lines.

The tension snapped in the spring of 1851, when McGee went through a profound conversion experience and wound up as one of the leading ultramontanists in Irish America, entering the mental universe of Jaime Balmez and Orestes Brownson.[33] The liberal McGee had recoiled against what he called 'slavish ultramontane dogmas' on the grounds that they would culminate in theocracy rather than democracy.[34] Now, the ultramontane McGee used exactly the same logic, but concluded that theocracy was precisely what Ireland needed. For McGee during the 1850s, Home Rule in Ireland really would mean Rome Rule, and no bad thing either.[35]

In the very different political and religious climate of the United States, his ultramontane ambitions were necessarily more modest. There, McGee believed, the Catholic Church could provide the critically important function of saving the Republic from the consequences of Protestantism and private judgment, which manifested themselves in a variety of ways – a constant state of nervous excitement; the breakdown of the family; in prejudice and proselytising; and in the exploitation, degradation, squalor, violence, corruption, materialism and nativism of urban America.[36] In fact, McGee's public criticisms of American life were very similar to those of other Irish-American nationalists, most of whom secretly despised American society even

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[31] Donal A. Kerr, *'A Nation of Beggars?' Priests, People and Politics in Famine Ireland, 1846 – 52* (Oxford, 1994), 241 – 81; for Russell's 'mummeries of superstition', see 247.

[32] *American Celt*, 30 November 1850, 11 January 1851, 19 April 1851.

[33] *American Celt*, 17, 31 May 1851, 11 March 1854. Balmez (often spelled Balmes) was a Catalonian priest whose *Protestantism and Catholicism Compared in their Effects on the Civilization of Europe* (Baltimore, 1850) became one of the most influential Catholic books of the nineteenth century. A convert to Catholicism and the editor of the *Quarterly Review*, Brownson was the leading Catholic intellectual in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century.

[34] Thomas D'Arcy McGee to David Urquhart, 8 September 1847, Balliol College Oxford, Urquhart Papers, I/J6; see also *American Celt*, 12 January 1850.

[35] See, for example, *American Celt*, 26 March 1853.

[36] On the role of the Catholic Church in saving the United States from the consequences of Protestantism, see *American Celt*, 20 November 1852. For examples of his critique of American values, see *American Celt*, 14 April 1855, 12 May 1855, 23 June 1855, 27 October 1855, 10 May 1856.

as they held up the American political system as a model for Ireland.[37] But McGee shouted from the rooftops what others only whispered in private, and McGee was unique among the exiles of '48 in that his criticisms of American life were expressed through the medium of extreme right-wing Catholicism.

McGee's conversion to ultramontanism did not imply any softening of his position towards Britain; on the contrary, it produced an intensification of his Anglophobia, with Britain now being viewed as the centre of a Protestant conspiracy against Catholics, or – to use McGee's own words – as the hub of the 'Revolution of Antichrist'.[38] But in the longer run, McGee's ultramontanism had a profound and unexpected impact on his relationship with the United States and the British Empire. As he became increasingly disillusioned with American life, and as he despaired of reforming it from within, McGee embraced the idea of establishing Irish-Catholic colonies in the American west or the Canadian north. This, he hoped, would make it possible to rescue anywhere between 50,000 and 200,000 Irish immigrants from the degradation and corruption of urban America and to inoculate them against the contamination of Protestantism and revolutionary republicanism. In these rural colonies, McGee looked forward to inscribing his ideal image of Ireland on what he perceived to be a 'blank' slate of new territory in North America.[39]

The project, which he named 'Shin Fane',[40] attracted significant support from sections of the Catholic Church, but was roundly condemned by Bishop Hughes and by McGee's ultramontane mentors such as Orestes Brownson. 'Moses McGee', as he was called, was attacked for running away from American problems, for exaggerating the difficulties facing Irish Catholics in the United States, and for being unpatriotic and quixotic.[41] And why on earth was this man advocating Catholic colonies in Canada, of all places, the home of the Orange Order and part of the British Empire? Catholic journalists like Father John Roddan were amazed that McGee, who

[37] For some examples, see John Mitchel to his sister, 5 March 1849, National Library of Ireland, Hickey Collection, MS 3226; Richard O'Gorman to William Smith O'Brien, 1 January 1859, National Library of Ireland, William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 446, f. 3082; Thomas Meagher to Charles Gavan Duffy, 17 January 1853, National Library of Ireland, Charles Gavan Duffy Papers, MS 5757, f. 387; Michael Doheny to William Smith O'Brien, 20 August 1858, National Library of Ireland, William Smith O'Brien Papers, MS 446, f. 3058.

[38] *Nation* [Dublin], 4 September 1852.

[39] *American Celt*, 27 January 1855, 3 February 1855, 8 September 1855.

[40] *American Celt*, 23 June 1855.

[41] *Boston Pilot*, 6 October 1855.

had been 'the most cordial hater of the English flag we ever saw', and 'an almost insane hater of the British government', could endorse colonisation in a place like Canada.[42]

IV Colonial 'Frontiers'

To understand why, we have to chart the connection between McGee's Catholicism and his colonialism, the way in which someone who once described the British Empire as 'a vast conspiracy against human rights' became, in the words of Lord Mayo, 'one of the most eloquent advocates of British rule and British institutions … on the face of the globe.'[43] Although McGee remained hostile to the British Empire during the early 1850s, his attitude towards the Province of Canada began to change with his conversion to ultramontanism. In the United States, he believed, Catholics had little or no political power, and could not provide their children with a Catholic education free of attempts to convert them to Protestantism. But in Canada, things looked rather different; the large French Roman Catholic population guaranteed the 'powerful position of the Catholic Church' and ensured that all Catholics, including the Irish, could educate their children in separate schools. Shortly after his conversion, McGee began to recommend the Canadian educational model for the United States.[44]

Now, there was an apparent paradox here. On the one hand, his ultramontanism intensified his hostility to the Protestant British Empire; on the other, within one pocket of that Empire it seemed that Catholics were actually better off than they were in the Great American Republic. Initially, from 1851 to 1854, he managed to have it both ways, praising the Canadian educational system while criticising just about everything else in the Province of Canada, including its Orangeism, its colonial status and its bigotry.[45] But with the rise of the nativist Know-Nothing movement in 1854, and his deepening sense of alienation in the United States, he decided to conduct a firsthand investigation of Canada East, or present-day Quebec. He liked what he saw, describing in his newspaper, the *American Celt*, the 'glitter of a hundred

[42] *Boston Pilot*, 7 July 1855.
[43] *Nation* [New York], 14 July 1849; *Daily News* [Quebec], 14 April 1868.
[44] *American Celt*, 8 November 1851, 8 January 1853.
[45] See, for example, *American Celt*, 18 June 1853, 20 August 1853, 15 April 1854, 24 June 1854, 5 August 1854.

crosses crowning the tin-covered domes and spires', the respect shown to priests ('even … Protestants … lift their hats whenever a priest passes'), the family values, the pace of life, the moral and physical health of the population, as well as the availability of good farming land in the Eastern Townships. All in all, it was a much more promising place for Irish-Catholic immigrants than the United States. 'The British flag does indeed fly here,' he wrote, 'but it casts no shadow.'[46]

But that still left Canada West, present-day Ontario, the Orange heartland of North America. During the summer of 1855, he spent three weeks in the province on a fact-finding mission and concluded that the narrow ground had become broader in Canada. The relative abundance of resources meant that there was less economic competition between Orangemen and Irish Catholics. And the variegated nature of Canadian politics meant that Canadian Orangemen had to form alliances with other groups, including French Catholics, if they wanted to move from the margin to the mainstream. 'The Canadian Order', McGee wrote, 'is largely modified; is far more political than religious, and (except on the 12th, when they go mad, of course), I am assured by the most respectable Catholics in Canada West, that they have no better neighbours all the rest of the year, than these same Orangemen.'[47] There were indeed some strange new alliances in Canada; a few years later, in 1861, the Irish Catholic bishop of Toronto, John Lynch, encouraged his flock to vote for John Hillyard Cameron, the Grand Master of the Orange Order, on the grounds that his party, the Conservatives, would introduce improved separate school legislation.[48] The folks back home in Ireland would have been shaking their heads in disbelief.

There were also, it must be recognised, serious Orange and Green tensions on the streets and all was far from sweetness and light in nineteenth-century Irish Canada. Indeed, after McGee moved to Montreal in 1857, he spent the next six years fighting the influence of the Orange Order, before forming an alliance with moderate Orangemen – 'the right kind' of Orangemen, as he put it.[49] But the key point is that by 1857, his disillusionment with the United States, together with his reading of the situation on the ground in

[46] *American Celt*, 9 December, 16 December 1854.

[47] *American Celt*, 4 August 1855.

[48] *Globe* [Toronto], 13 July 1861; Michael Cottrell, *Irish Catholic Political Leadership in Toronto, 1855 – 1882: A Study of Ethnic Politics* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1988), 110 – 1.

[49] Thomas D'Arcy McGee to John A. Macdonald, 15 February 1868, Library and Archives Canada, John A. Macdonald Papers, MG26A, vol. 231, f. 100008.

Canada, had forced him to modify and ultimately reject his earlier sweeping anti-colonialism.

In Canada, he reasoned, the French fact would continue to ensure Catholic power and influence; even the Orangemen had to accommodate themselves to this basic political reality. Meanwhile, the proximity of the United States to Canada acted as a check on British oppression and the dangers of excessive power; if Britain pushed too hard, the Province of Canada would react by joining the United States. On the other hand, Canada's connection with Britain acted as a check on American annexationism and the dangers of excessive liberty; if America pushed too hard, Britain would be at Canada's back.[50]

The imperial connection, then, provided the gravitational pull that prevented Canada from being drawn into the United States. But Britain was 3,000 miles across the Atlantic, while the rising American empire dominated the continent and constituted the greatest long-range threat to Canada. One way to counter that threat, McGee suggested, would be to invite a member of the Royal Family – the prince of Wales, perhaps, or one of his brothers – to found a British North American branch of the monarchy, and sit on a Canadian throne.[51] Another would be to work for Canadian Confederation – a project that he advocated shortly before he moved to Montreal, and that remained a central preoccupation throughout his Canadian career.[52]

If Canada was to work, McGee believed that it not only had to become an equal partner in the British Empire, but also had to secure good relations among its various ethno-religious groups. On these grounds, the former anti-colonialist became one of the sharpest critics of the Little Englanders, or anti-colonialists, in Britain; without the imperial connection, Canada would cease to exist.[53] And on these grounds, he attacked both militant Fenianism and Orangeism in Canada. Both organisations were bringing Old Country animosities into the New World, and both organisations threatened the position of Irish Catholics in Canada. McGee objected to Fenianism not only on account of its anti-clericalism and its unattainable goals, but also because he feared that it would create a Protestant backlash against the Irish-Catholic

[50] *American Celt*, 21 April 1855; *New Era*, 25 May 1857.

[51] *New Era*, 19 January 1858; see also 16 February 1858.

[52] McGee first articulated his ideas about British North American union in the *American Celt*, 26 July 1856, and elaborated upon them in the *New Era*; see, for example, *New Era*, 22 October 1857.

[53] See, for example, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, 'Canadian Defences', 27 March 1862, *Speeches and Addresses Chiefly on the Subject of British-American Union* (London, 1865), 199 – 205.

minority in Canada.[54] The dangers posed by Orangeism, with its long history of anti-Catholicism, were self-evident. Moderate Irish Catholics, McGee believed, should attempt to expand the middle ground between these two extremes, and should use their shared Celtic heritage with the Highland Scots and the French Canadians to promote ethno-religious harmony.[55] The result, he hoped, would be a Canadianised version of Young Ireland nationalism in its constitutional phase before the French Revolution of February 1848. A new confederated British North American state would demonstrate that Irish Catholics were loyal when their civil and social rights were respected, and would stand as a powerful argument for land reform and disestablishment in Ireland – and possibly for a federal arrangement with Britain as well.[56] Catholicism, Celticism and colonialism, after all, had been brought into harmony in Canada; the task ahead, in McGee's view, was to transpose the melody to Ireland.

V The Final Frontier

McGee's career is a fascinating example of the interplay between environment and ideas; between, if you like, the frontiers of the mind and frontiers of space. This took the form of a series of reactions against prevailing circumstances, and against ideological orthodoxies. After his first emigration to the United States in 1842, McGee increasingly criticised key aspects of Irish-American culture – what he saw as the hyperbolic patriotism of St Patrick's Day celebrations, the pervasive victim mentality, and the resistance to self-criticism. At the same time, he responded to American nativism with a combative Catholicism that was intended to face down Protestant prejudice. Had McGee stayed in the United States, it is likely that this trajectory would have propelled him towards the minority clerical-conservative strand of Irish nationalism in the United States.

Instead, he returned to Ireland, where his involvement in the Young Ireland movement meant that he moved away from prospective clerical-conservative traditions and towards the ecumenical nationalism of Thomas Davis. Under the pressure of new circumstances, in the context of Famine and the French

[54] David A. Wilson, "'A Rooted Horror": Thomas D'Arcy McGee and Secret Societies', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 31 (2005), 45 – 51.

[55] *True Witness* [Montreal], 12 February 1858.

[56] Thomas D'Arcy McGee to the earl of Mayo, 4 April 1868, Library and Archives Canada, Charles Murphy Papers, MG27 III B8, f. 21586.

Revolution, he embraced revolutionary nationalism, and adopted ideas that were indistinguishable from those of the Irish Republican Brotherhood a decade later. Although he subsequently repudiated revolutionary politics, he sometimes defended his actions in 1848 by saying that if he should face the same circumstances again, he would act no differently than he had done before.

McGee's career can be likened to a series of chemical reactions, in which the same environment produced the same results. Back in the United States between 1848 and 1857, he resumed the trajectory that had been interrupted by his return to Ireland. Reacting first against his revolutionary nationalism (on the grounds that it was impractical and thus counterproductive), he moved through moral force politics to an ultramontane position that was defined as much by what it was against as what it was for – against nativism in the United States, against aggressive forms of Protestantism, against the moral degradation of ghettoised Irish Americans, against the secular republican and revolutionary aspects of Irish-American nationalism. It was precisely this reaction that prompted his colonisation project, and which brought him to Canada.

There, geo-political realities – in which Britain counterbalanced American influences, the United States counterbalanced British imperialism, and French Canada counterbalanced Orangeism – produced an environment which complemented the balances in his own thought. In Canada, he believed, it was possible to reconcile order and liberty, Catholicism and Protestantism, tradition and modernity. It was, from his perspective, an environment that was ideally suited to the ideas of Edmund Burke, whom McGee had long revered as a fellow Celt, as a closet Catholic and as a spokesman for enlightened empire. In Canada, it seemed, geography had met history, and McGee had finally found a home.

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