



WHO ARE THE CELTS?

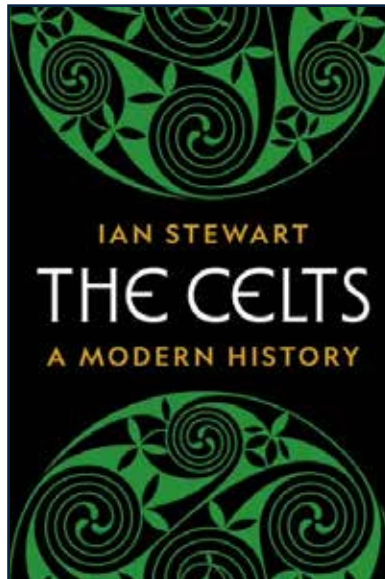
The Celts: A Modern History by Ian Stewart (Princeton University Press) is not, despite what the title might suggest, a history, modern or otherwise, of the Celts. It is instead a history of the *idea* of “the Celts”, which is indeed a modern one. Before the early eighteenth century, there was no suggestion that the peoples we now know as “the Celts”—the Irish, Scots, Welsh, Bretons, Cornish, and Manx—had anything to do with the *Celtae* or *Keltoi* of Classical writers.

The latter lived, or were said to have lived, in what is now France, Iberia, and the vicinity of the Alps including Northern Italy, with irruptions to sack Rome in 387 B.C. and assail the Greek shrine of Delphi in 279 B.C. They eventually established a colony at the opposite end of Europe from the Emerald Isle, in Anatolia in what is now Turkey. These were the Galatians to whom St. Paul addressed his Epistle. Archaeologically they are known from, or at least generally connected with, the Urnfeld culture of Southern Germany, and its successors, Hallstatt, named from finds in Austria and La Tène, named after a site in Switzerland. Some artifacts attributable to these cultures have been found in the British Isles, but most authorities consider the cultures themselves to be of Central European origin.

This book tells, in great detail, the tale of the origin and spread of the idea that the European Celts known to ancient Greece and Rome eventually became, or were the same people as, the Celts of the West and North of the British Isles and Brittany in north-western France. This idea, the concept of “Celticity”, went through many, often very strange, distortions and permutations before ending up where it has today.

The first scholars to connect the Kelts and the Celts were Paul-Yves Pezron in France and Edward Lhwyd in Wales, who independently made the connection in the 1690s and published their conclusions at

the start of the next century. Pezron further argued that the Gauls, who inhabited France before the Germanic Frankish invaders gave it its present name when they overran it as Rome was falling in the fifth century A.D., were also Celts. This was, as Stewart reveals, to have important reverberations throughout French politics and culture in the succeeding centuries. Pez-



ron’s idea that the ancestral Celtic language was spoken by the Titans of Greek mythology has lasted less well, but in the pages of this volume are to be found far stranger ideas, which sprang like mushrooms from the fertile soil of the idea of Celticity.

The idea that the Welsh, Cornish, and Breton languages were related had been current at least since Giraldus Cambrensis, Gerald of Wales, pointed it out in 1194. Speakers of these languages to this day can, slowly and hesitantly, to some extent, understand one another. But Irish, and its daughters, Scots Gaelic and Manx, appears a totally alien tongue, and nobody before the late seventeenth century had suggested any connection with Welsh and its siblings. Irish scholars connected their speech with

Phoenician, whilst their Welsh counterparts tried to derive *Cymraeg* from Hebrew.

Lhwyd, in particular, realised that words starting with P in Welsh tended to start with a sound English spells as Q, but Irish usually with C. For example Welsh *pen*—head—is Irish *ceann*. This correspondence, he realised, was systematic, and one of a number of deep rooted common features clearly showing that Welsh and Irish were more closely related than either was to any other still extant tongue. Notably the use of mutations, changes in initial consonants according to strict grammatical rules. For example, there is a town in North Wales called “Bangor”. But in Welsh “from Bangor” is “o Fangor” (where single F is pronounced as V) and “in Bangor” is “ym Mhangor”. Irish does something similar. No other European languages do this.

Pezron spotted the fact that the surviving fragments of ancient Gaulish also show a relationship to Welsh, in particular: we now know Gaulish to have been a P-Celtic language, like Welsh, not a Q-Celtic language like Irish. Roman historians identified the Gauls as *Keltoi*, or in Latin *Celtae*, Celts. If the Gauls were Celts, the logic of their uniquely related languages strongly suggested that so must be the Welsh and Irish. And yet, as this book describes, fascinatingly to this reader at least, it took a long time to convince the Irish, in particular, of that.

Other theories were more extreme, with some arguing that Celtic languages, notably Breton, were the original speech of all mankind. Meanwhile the ancient stone structures of the British Isles, notably Stonehenge, were ascribed to Celts in general and Druids in particular, when in fact we now know them to have been as ancient to the Druids of the first century A.D. as the Parthenon of Athens is to us today, and no doubt a good deal more mysterious.

Once the heady idea of Celticness was unleashed upon the world, this book trac-

es its evolution and development, often in very strange directions and sometimes in the hands of very strange people.

For example, Stewart tells the tale of the young Scottish Highlander James Macpherson who between 1760 and 1763 published his “translations” of the ballads of Ossian, the “Third Century A.D. Caledonian bard”, to general appreciation and applause in literary circles across Britain and Europe. The Ossianic Ballads are to this day regarded as one of the inspirations of the European Romantic movement, and were avidly read by Napoleon Bonaparte, Goethe, and sundry other luminaries. Their “translator” used them to support his contention that “Caledonian”—Scots Gaelic—was the oldest Celtic language and that the “Caledonians” colonised Britain before the Welsh and then founded the Irish nation, Ireland being a mere Scots colony (it is now clear that the reverse is true).

The Ballads are in fact an inspiring work of literature. But, as Dr Johnson suspected at the time, they are also a total forgery. Macpherson repeatedly promised to provide the original third century A.D. Caledonian Gaelic texts he had “translated”, but somehow never managed actually to do so, probably because they could never have existed. In the third century A.D., nobody in Scotland spoke Gaelic—most then spoke a P-Celtic language ancestral to modern Welsh, although the debate continues as to whether the Picts spoke that or some very ancient pre-Indo-European tongue. Gaelic did not reach Scotland until the Irish invasion of Argyll in the early sixth century.

Wales too was afflicted with a Celtic mist of fakery and nonsense, as this book also relates. In this case, the chief culprit was one Edward Williams, who called himself “Iolo Morgannwg”. On the morning of June 21, 1792, the Summer Solstice, he led several of the acolytes he had recruited up the not obviously Celtic slopes of Primrose Hill in North London to induct them into the *Gorsedd y Beirdd Ynys Prydain*, the Throne of the Bards of the Island of Britain, according to 2000-year-old “ancient Druidic lore” to which he, a stonemason from Glamorgan, was one of only two living men to be privy. In support of this contention “Iolo” published vast screeds of said “lore”, alleged “lost works” of mediaeval Welsh bards, an “ancient Druidic alphabet” and so on and so forth.

Like Macpherson, he thought his native Celtic speech, in his case the Welsh dialect of Glamorgan, was the One True Original

Celtic language. “Iolo’s” output was suitably high-flown, mysterious and pervaded with a Celtic mist. It was also mostly a load of made-up codswallop, in some of which the author’s taste for laudanum, an opiate drug, is manifest. But he also salted the forgeries with bits of genuine bardic material, in which he was evidently notably learned, if self-taught. And, unlike his Scots counterpart, he left a lasting legacy.

Whilst Macpherson’s “Ossianic Ballads” are now of mere historic interest, Iolo Morgannwg’s pseudo-Druidry and the Gorsedd of Bards he made up is still at the heart of

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modern Welsh cultural life, celebrated with appropriate robes and ceremonies at every *eisteddfod*, the main festivals of living Welsh culture, though those involved today realise the roots of their rituals are fictitious. Nonetheless they have by now transformed them into something both inspiring and, in its own way, authentic. Indeed, Iolo is memorialised for the ages in the sub-Stonehengean rings of stone still left by every national *eisteddfod* as a memorial to its festivities, doubtless to the confusion of far-future archaeologists. These are based on Iolo’s encouragement of, in fairness, the general belief of his time that megalithic monuments were erected by the Druids.

Meanwhile, contemporaneously in France, the concept of Celticness was politicised by the Revolutionaries, who declared that they were the native Gauls sweeping away the alien Frankish aristocrats and royalty. The Abbé Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, who despite his clerical background was a leading light in the French Revolution, prominent in the Assembly and holding high office under the Directory, in his influential 1789 pamphlet “What is the Third Estate?”, argued that the “native Celtic Gaulish” common people were

the real French nation whilst the nobility were alien invaders who should “return to their Franconian forests”. Stewart goes on to trace the continuing influence of this concept of “*nos ancêtres les Gaulois*” on France to this day.

Later in Germany, our author informs us, Adolf Hitler proclaimed that Jesus Christ was a Celt, on the grounds that the word Galilee must be derived from Gaul and therefore was peopled by Celts.

Returning to the realm of sanity, Stewart carries his tale of the genesis and evolution of the idea of Celticity onward to the present day, via sundry Pan-Celtic leagues, General de Gaulle’s uncle and the role played by the cult of Celticness in what became Irish Republicanism. He points out that interest in Ireland’s Celtic identity and language was originally fostered amongst Irish Protestants and often Unionists, as an alternative to an essentially religious base of Irish nationhood from which they were excluded. An interesting point revealed is that W. B. Yeats’ celebrated “Celtic Twilight” was intended by its author to refer not to the aftermath of sunset but to the precursor of dawn. He concludes with the recent suggestion, by the leading British archaeologist Barry Cunliffe amongst others, that, instead of coming from Europe to Britain, Celtic language and culture evolved in the British Isles and spread to mainland Europe. Clearly the evolution of the idea of Celticity goes on.

There is very little in this book about the Celts as an objective reality, their fascinating and impressive history and culture or their ancient and unique languages. Instead, it is a magisterial overview of the Celts as a subjective idea, and of the consequences of such an idea. This is to be expected as the author’s academic background is in the history of ideas rather than peoples. Although at times it reads like an expanded academic treatise, which this reader found absorbing, it offers fascinating insights nonetheless.

The Celts: A Modern History by Ian Stewart is newly published by Princeton University Press (ISBN: 978 069 1222516).

With Celtic roots himself—as his surname might suggest—Stephen Brady has retired to dwell amid the Celtic mists. There he has also learned a Celtic language and enjoys the local Celtic culture.