

Irish antiquity and ancient Greece: Standish O'Grady's *History of Ireland*

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Published between 1878 and 1881, the three volumes of Standish O'Grady's *History of Ireland* comprise a narrative of Irish mythology, driven by the author's conviction that many of the ancient tales were rooted in actual history. Although not immediately felt, the impact of *History of Ireland* became long-lasting, a point of departure for an array of literary works treating Irish mythological topics during what came to be known as the Irish Literary Revival. This paper addresses *History of Ireland* from the perspective of O'Grady's background as a student of ancient Greek civilization. It considers the most important comparisons that he drew between Irish and Greek antiquity, including his contention that the seat of the High Kings of Ireland, Tara, was equivalent in symbolism to Mount Olympus in ancient Greece. The paper assesses the strengths, weaknesses and significance of O'Grady's case for considering Irish mythology as approximate to that of the Greeks.

KEYWORDS

Standish O'Grady, Irish mythology, Irish history, ancient Greece

INTRODUCTION: O'GRADY'S TURN TO ANCIENT IRELAND

Standish James O'Grady has sometimes been called the father of the Irish Revival.¹ This movement involved an upsurge in Irish literary and cultural activities from the 1890s to the 1930s.

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¹HAGAN (1986) 1; CASTLE-BIXBY (2016) 1-3; MCATEER (2002) 14-18.

These include the revival of the Irish language, new publications on Irish mythology and folklore, new artworks on Irish themes, a new Irish Theatre movement, and public debates about the future of Irish culture. The Revival coincides with Ireland's achievement of political independence from Britain through the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922, governing all but six counties in the north-east of the island, counties that remained part of the United Kingdom as Northern Ireland. It is stretching credulity to trace all the diverse cultural enterprises of the Irish Revival back to the publications of Standish O'Grady, but there is no doubt that the books he published between 1878 and 1882 were significant, particularly for narratives, plays and poems on Irish mythology.

O'Grady was born in the port town of Castletown Berehaven on the coast of County Cork, the most southerly county in Ireland, in September 1846. He was the son of Reverend Thomas O'Grady, the local Protestant Church of Ireland Rector, and Susanna O'Grady. Edward Hagan notes that his parents were strongly evangelical in their Christian religious beliefs, a characteristic that influenced O'Grady, even if he himself was not similarly inclined.² After his primary school studies at Tipperary Grammar School, O'Grady went to Trinity College Dublin, first as a divinity student and then as a law student. Hagan identifies his impressive achievements at Trinity College, winning the classical scholarship, the University silver medal in Ethics and Psychology, the Philosophical Society Silver medal in oratory and gold medal in essay writing.³ Irish history or the Irish language formed no part of O'Grady's studies, however, as the University educational system at Trinity College in nineteenth century Ireland closely followed the model of English Universities. Study of the Irish language was exclusively a philological concern at Trinity College. Instead of Irish, O'Grady's primary cultural interest was in Greek and Latin, developing from his classical studies at the University. As Hagan notes, O'Grady was fascinated with early Greek poetry and had some translations published in the University magazine, *Kottabos*.⁴

According to the writer himself, O'Grady first came across Irish mythology and ancient Irish history by accident around the age of twenty-four. In an article published in the Christmas issue of one of the leading newspapers of the Irish Revival, *The Irish Homestead*, he records his experience as if it was a kind of religious awakening:

I think I was in my 24th year when something happened which has since then governed the general trend of my life, and through me that of others. In a country house in the west of Ireland, near the sea, I had to stay indoors one rainy day, and though my appetite for literature was slender enough then, in default of other amusements I spent the time in looking over the books in the library. So I chanced upon O'Halloran's *History of Ireland*, in three volumes – the first History of Ireland into which I had ever looked. He wrote, I think, in the second decade of this century and before the rise of the Vallency School. His style was scholarly, eloquent and impassioned; reason appeared to govern all his statements. To O'Halloran the Book of Invasions was an authentic historical document, and he had a great deal to say of a seemingly illuminative and quite creditable nature concerning the successive waves of Irish colonisation represented by the Ceasairians, Partholians,

²HAGAN (1986) 10.

³HAGAN (1986) 13. Psychology and Ethics were taught in the third year of the curriculum at Trinity College from the University's earliest years in the seventeenth century. McDOWELL–WEBB (1982) 5.

⁴HAGAN (1986) 13–14.



Nemedians, etc. The History of Ireland as expounded by O'Halloran ran back to an age when Greece was still in the cradle.⁵

The book to which O'Grady refers is Sylvester O'Halloran's *An Introduction to the Study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland* of 1772.⁶ This study addresses Celtic civilization in Ireland from antiquity. Among the wide array of topics in O'Halloran's book are the following: a religious order of Irish origins among the Gauls in the territory of modern-day France; the Gods of the ancient Irish; the different types of building for sacred worship in Ireland. He claims that the German orders of knighthood originated in Ireland along with one of the institutions of knighthood among the Gauls, the *Ambacti*. O'Halloran asserts that the ancient Irish had a deep respect for their national history and that some had migrated to Greece and Egypt, instructing the native populations. He contends that some Irish had settled in ancient Greece. He quotes a passage from Book Three of *Bibliotheca historica* by the ancient Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus, describing an island, "lying opposite to the Celtæ", the sacred temple within which was presided over by rulers and priests known as the *Boreades*.⁷ O'Halloran proposes that Siculus' description of the island indicates that he is referring to Ireland. O'Halloran takes as ancient historical fact the existence of such tribes as the Fir Bolgs among the earliest inhabitants of the island. He also accepts the case that the Milesians emerged as the most powerful among these early inhabitants, invading Ireland from Spain and developing a sophisticated monarchical system that centred on the seat of Tara in the east of Ireland, north of Dublin.

The primary source for O'Halloran's claims is the anonymous, multi-authored *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of Invasions of Ireland*), "a combination of mythology, legend, history, and biblical events", as Giena Matson puts it, that Irish monks wrote down during the middle ages. Along with other monastically-produced manuscripts of the Irish medieval period, the *Book of Invasions* forms "the invented 'history' of how Ireland was settled by gods and mortals. The book begins with the biblical flood and describes several generations of settlers, ending with the ancestors of the Celtic people".⁸ Among these mythical settlers of ancient Ireland were three that O'Grady mentions in "A Wet Day": the Ceasairians, Partholansians, Nemedians. The Ceasairians refer to the descendants of Cesair. She was the daughter of an apocryphal son of Noah from the Old Testament Book of Genesis, a man named Bith. According to the *Book of Invasions*, Bith, Cesair and their companions sailed for seven years until they reached Ireland and settled there, Bith dying before the flooding of the world as described in the Old Testament.⁹ The name Partholansian refers to the second tribe to invade Ireland as described in the *Book of Invasions*, the name itself possibly a version of Bartholomaeus invented by Irish monks in the middle ages.¹⁰ The Nemedians, or the people of Nemed, were the third group to invade Ireland,

⁵O'GRADY (1899).

⁶O'HALLORAN (1772).

⁷O'HALLORAN (1772) 70.

⁸MATSON (2004) ix.

⁹MACKILLOP (1998) 38.

¹⁰MACKILLOP (1998) 260.



Nemed also having ancestry traced back to the Old Testament Noah, in his case through Noah's son Japheth, as presented in *The Book of Invasions*.¹¹

The profound impact of O'Halloran's *History of Ireland* appears in two aspects of O'Grady's publications: his sense of the importance of national history as well as the connections that he observes between the world of ancient Ireland and that of ancient Greece. O'Grady published three volumes on Irish mythology between 1878 and 1882 that would later exert a formative influence upon writers of the Irish Revival such as W. B. Yeats, George Russell (AE), Katharine Tynan, Eleanor Hull, Thomas William Rolleston and Patrick Pearse, leader of the 1916 rebellion for Irish independence. A belief in antiquity as a living influence on the present lies at the heart of what O'Grady sought to achieve through his accounts of Irish mythology. He expresses this conviction in a citation from the Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus when introducing his first major work on ancient Ireland, volume one of *History of Ireland*, published in 1878:

I remember some remark of Horace to this effect. "Hence it happens that we see, as in a picture, all the life of the old man." This has been my object to represent, as in a picture, the state of society which obtained in this country in ancient times, which, though distant in one sense, are near in many others. It is the same sky that bent over them, which shines or darkens over us. The same human heart beat in their breasts as beats amongst us today. All the great permanent relations of life are the same.¹²

Two points are immediately striking in this passage. O'Grady compares his narrative of ancient Ireland to a painting in the belief that, at its best, art conveys fundamental characteristics of life. This attitude separates his approach from that of a scientific archaeologist or an academic historian, meaning that what is understood by history is a matter of contention in O'Grady's work. Secondly, O'Grady starts out in his writing on ancient Ireland on the basis that primary conditions of life relate ancient Ireland to the country in his own time. Antiquity is not just a far-distant time from the Irish present, to be appreciated for its colour almost in the manner of a fantasy. The characters, events and circumstances, through which this ancient world is given expression, convey a spirit of Irish life that is substantial for the modern age, even though it may only be felt dimly, if at all. As an educated man well versed in Greek and Latin classics, O'Grady turns to Irish antiquity in the hope of awakening a consciousness of this spirit among the educated classes in Ireland in the same way that it was awakened in him through his first encounter with the writing of Sylvester O'Halloran.

MYTHOLOGY AS HISTORY: *HISTORY OF IRELAND*

O'Grady's three most important and influential works are *History of Ireland: the Heroic Period* (1878), *History of Ireland: Cuculain and His Contemporaries* (1880), *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical* (1881). During the years in which these books appeared, O'Grady also published a reprint of material from the first volume of *History of Ireland*, under the title, *Early Bardic Literature, Ireland* (O'GRADY, 1879). In these years of prolific output, he also published a pamphlet, *The Crisis in Ireland* (O'GRADY, 1882), outlining the prospect of obliteration

¹¹MacKillop (1998) 260.

¹²O'GRADY (1878) xii.



confronting the mainly Protestant Irish Landlord class in the face of the predominantly Catholic Irish Land League campaign of the early 1880s. The first volume of *History of Ireland* begins deep in the pre-historic era with short preliminary chapters quickly surveying the Pleistocene era and the ice-age. It continues with ethnological speculations on the earliest inhabitants of Ireland, proposing that the Irish had Basque and Celtic origins.¹³ O'Grady claims that the earliest information on Irish history comes from the bards of the civilisation that grew out of the settlement of the Milesian people in Ireland, coming from Spain. This view is important, since the relation of poetry and literary narrative to actual history is an indispensable aspect of O'Grady's approach to Irish mythology:

A nation's history is made for it by circumstances, and the irresistible progress of events; but their legends, they make for themselves. In that dim twilight region, where day meets night, the intellect of man, tired by contact with the vulgarity of actual things, goes back for rest and recuperation, and there sleeping, projects its dreams against the waning light and before the rising of the sun.

The legends represent the imagination of the country; they are that kind of history which a nation desires to possess. They betray the ambition and ideals of the people, and, in this respect, have a value far beyond the tale of actual events and duly recorded deeds, which are no more history than a skeleton is a man. Nay, too, they have their own reality. They fill the mind with an adequate and satisfying pleasure. They present a rhythmic completeness and beauty not to be found in the fragmentary and ragged succession of events in time.¹⁴

Taking this assertion of the historical importance of legend as its starting point, *History of Ireland* proceeds mainly as a modern narrative version of old stories that scholars have classified into different cycles of tales within Irish mythology. The first of these classifications is the Fenian or Ossianic cycle, stories associated with a band of warriors in ancient Ireland known as the *Fianna Éireann* [Band of Warriors of Éire], two of the most important members being Finn Mac Cumhaill and Oisín. Most important for O'Grady are the stories classified as belonging to the Ulster cycle, because he believed that these tales were most deeply rooted in actual Irish history. They were associated with a different band of warriors from the North of Ireland, the Red Branch Knights of Ulster. Their most celebrated hero was the warrior Cuculain. Particularly when narrating the story of Cuculain and the battle fought over the prized bull of Cooley in the Ulster cycle, O'Grady stridently held to his conviction that these stories were no mere fantasy of ancient times, but the outcome of real past events. They conveyed the spirit and values of the people from whom the tales originated: courage, honour, loyalty, imagination, belief in magic, divinities and supernatural power.

Published in 1880, the second volume of *History of Ireland* begins with an extended opening chapter making the case for regarding Irish mythology as historical in its origins. O'Grady also makes a plea to educated Irishmen to take the history of Ireland seriously, convinced as he is that a majority of the propertied and educated class in Ireland saw no merit in the study of Ireland's past:

Educated Irishmen are ignorant of, and indifferent to, their history; yet from the hold of that history they cannot shake themselves free. It still haunts the imagination, like Mordecai at Haman's gate,

¹³O'GRADY (1878) 15.

¹⁴O'GRADY (1878) 22–23.



a cause of continual annoyance and vexation. An Irishman can no more release himself from his history than he can absolve himself from social and domestic duties. He may outrage it, but he cannot placidly ignore. Hence the uneasy, impatient feeling with which the subject is generally regarded.¹⁵

These comments disclose O’Grady’s awareness of the opinions that volume one of *History of Ireland* provoked. It received a very positive review in *The Freeman’s Journal*, one of the most widely read newspapers in Ireland in O’Grady’s lifetime. The reviewer writes that “Mr O’Grady tells the myths with great spirit and poetic fire”, noting how he draws “the gold of fact from the ore of legend”. The reviewer positions O’Grady between the academic scholarship of such antiquarians as Eugene O’Curry and Jeremiah O’Donovan, and the general public.¹⁶ The reviewer in *John Bull* is equally admiring of O’Grady’s style, but much more sceptical of O’Grady’s claim that he was writing history: “Pleasant reading – pleasant reading indeed, thanks to the skill of Mr. O’Grady, but still fiction every letter of it.”¹⁷ In contrast, the reviewer of *The Cork Constitution* was emphatic in praising O’Grady’s work for lifting the Irish past beyond the realms of scholarly antiquarianism:

This is a work of genius. Mr. O’Grady is the late-born Hesiod, who has “made a theogony” of the Irish. He has erected a majestic vestibule to what will be, under his hands, a stately building. A mass of antiquarianism has long since been heaped before the threshold of Irish history, and has been a fatal obstruction to those who would enter the house of life; but Mr. O’Grady has transformed the unsightly heap into “a very pleasant hill,” and leads us through picturesque defiles and noble gorges to the summit, whence we may have a wide prospect over the surrounding plains.¹⁸

The eminent London Conservative magazine, *The Spectator*, also expressed admiration for O’Grady’s publication, if not with the same level of enthusiasm as *The Cork Constitution*:

In speaking of this volume, we do not intend to enter into the question of its value from an archaeological point of view; nor does the author’s manner of dealing with his subject seem to invite such criticism. The real importance of the book under notice lies in this, – that the writer has given to the general reader, in a bold and spirited manner, a succession of wild and poetic stories, each forming a part of that picturesque romance called the heroic period of the history of Ireland [...] The author of the present work is doing something to bring these beautiful legends under the notice of the world, and he deserves all honour for an attempt which we sincerely hope may be successful.¹⁹

These responses to the first volume show that, while most read *History of Ireland: the Heroic Period* as a literary rather than a historical work, there was much support for what O’Grady set out to achieve through his engagement with ancient Irish myth and legend.

History of Ireland: Cuculain and His Contemporaries concentrates entirely on tales relating to the Ulster cycle in the attempt to bolster the case that O’Grady made for the historicity of Irish mythology. O’Grady sensed in the tales of the North a strength, power and coherence that did

¹⁵O’GRADY (1880) 33.

¹⁶REVIEW1 (1878).

¹⁷REVIEW2 (1878).

¹⁸REVIEW3 (1878).

¹⁹REVIEW4 (1878) 19.



not exist to the same extent in other cycles of ancient Irish stories. From this intuition grew his conviction that the Ulster cycle conveyed the spirit of ancient Ireland more convincingly than the Fenian cycle of tales. O'Grady identified the tale of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (The War of the Bull of Cooley) as the core of the Ulster cycle and the hero standing at its centre, Cuculain, the most impressive of the warriors or warrior-gods that pervade Irish myth and legend. Recorded originally in scattered manuscripts, it first appears in a complete form in the twelfth century *Book of Leinster*.²⁰ The *Táin* is the story of a prized bull in the possession of Kingdom of Ulster, with its headquarters at the fort of Emain Macha, or Navan Fort, near the present-day town of Armagh in Northern Ireland. O'Grady's account narrates how members of the warrior-caste at Emain Macha defected from Ulster to the south of Ireland in response to the King's betrayal of one of the most revered members of the Red Branch Knights of the north, Fergus Mac Roy. Mac Roy joined the army of Queen Maeve, who ruled over territory in the west of Ireland. Some years after the events surrounding the betrayal of Fergus and his defection, Queen Maeve came into direct conflict with the army of Ulster in the attempt to take the famed Brown Bull of Cooley. Cooley is the name of a peninsula stretching into the Irish Sea, at a point between the south-east of the province of Ulster in the northern part of Ireland, and the north-east of Leinster in the eastern region. Part of the tragedy of the tale is that it brought Fergus into direct combat with his former friend and ally in the Red Branch Knights, Cuculain. O'Grady's account of the *Táin* magnifies Cuculain's heroism, in that he is forced to defend the kingdom of Emain Macha alone, because of a spell that Queen Maeve's druid has cast upon the warriors of the north, leaving them in a state of stupor. He is also the subject of direct attacks upon his strength from the druid Cailitin, attacks that are more difficult to overcome than the power of Queen Maeve's warriors that he is forced to withstand alone.²¹ Although the army of Ulster awoken from the spell cast upon them, they are eventually overwhelmed by the army of Queen Maeve. In the end, a warrior named Lewy Mac Conroi wounds Cuculain fatally. Before he dies, the soldiers of Connacht withdraw, in the certainty that Cuculain was immortal. His final vision is that of a boy, who tells Cuculain that the victory of Queen Maeve over the kingdom of Emain Macha was only temporary, upon which he passes from life.²²

THE FEIS OF TARA AND THE FESTIVAL OF OLYMPUS

O'Grady bases his belief in the historical origins of Irish mythology on the remnants of sacred sites from pagan times scattered throughout the countryside. Foremost among these is the hill of Tara. This is an ancient ceremonial and burial site in rural County Meath, located approximately 35 km from today's Dublin city centre. Irish tradition identifies it as the seat and place of inauguration of the High Kings of Ireland in antiquity. James MacKillop writes that Queen Maeve, considered a goddess in ancient times, regarded Tara as sacred, and that it was a place of mating with the local earth-goddess at ritual banquets.²³ O'Grady accords the highest reverence

²⁰CAREY (2018).

²¹O'GRADY (1880) 181–89.

²²O'GRADY (1880) 335–46.

²³MACKILLOP (1998) 354–55.



for Tara, magnifying the stature of the location way beyond its relatively small size. O'Grady's Tara is "a spot forever sacred", a place where violent and bitter wars or rivalries between the wide array of different Irish clans could be settled. He believed it to be a place where wise brehons (judges) dispensed justice fairly and where ancient forms of parliamentary assemblies were held. He also saw Tara as an ancient meeting place where craftsmen could sell their wares, armourers their weapons; a place where harpists competed in music competitions, where chroniclers of the past could display their knowledge, and where bards could recite their best verses.²⁴

O'Grady develops an argument that in antiquity public fairs served a similar purpose to the social functions discharged by cities and parliaments in the modern age. He draws close comparison between ancient Greece and ancient Ireland in support of his case. O'Grady does not see the Olympian nor the Isthmian gatherings in ancient Greece as sporting occasions. Rather he views them as meetings for commercial reasons and the settling of relations between different tribes. He considers the festival of Tara along exactly the same lines. It was a triennial fair that surpassed all others in Ireland, midway between the north and south of the country. O'Grady declares that chieftains from the remotest parts of Ireland assembled at Tara, a festival during which any ongoing wars between different Irish tribes were suspended. He further claims that, from a humble beginning, the Feis (festival) of Tara advanced in ancient times "until it became for Ireland what the Olympian festival was to Greece".²⁵

In her posthumously published autobiography, *Seventy Years*, the co-founder of the Irish Literary Theatre and the patron of modern Irish authors at Coole Park, Lady Augusta Gregory, remarked that "Standish O'Grady's Homeric paraphrases had long been an inspiration and a delight".²⁶ The statement is not just a testimony to the extent of O'Grady's influence on the Irish Revival, but also to the depth of his classical Greek learning as an influence on his perspective of Irish antiquity and Irish mythology. Out of an understandable enthusiasm upon his recognition of affinities between ancient Greek and ancient Irish worlds, O'Grady demonstrated a tendency to inflate his claims. This is evident in the comparison that he draws between the Feis of Tara and the Festival of Olympus, wherein he goes so far as to assert that the Irish institution was more accomplished than that of the Greek. His argument to this end runs as follows. The Eleans were entrusted with hosting the festival of Olympus, but without any possibility of using this honour to extend their power over other tribes or territories. O'Grady believed that the Greeks preferred the festival to be hosted in this way so as to prevent rivalries and warfare emerging from contests to host the festival. By agreeing to grant the relatively weak tribe of the Eleans the right to host it, the more powerful tribes separated that privilege from meaningful political power in Greece. O'Grady contrasts this institution of the Olympian festival with the Feis of Tara. The latter was open to any king ambitious enough to host it, allowing for the prospect of an all-powerful king and dynasty to emerge from the contest. As a consequence, O'Grady believed that the Feis of Tara was more successful in achieving Irish national unity than the Festival of Olympus, because it gave rise to a powerful family who laid claim to High Kingship of all of Ireland: "Thus the Irish did work out for themselves unity, which the kings did not;

²⁴O'GRADY (1878) 40–41.

²⁵O'GRADY (1878) 41.

²⁶SMYTHE (1974) 391.



for out of these contentions for the possession of Tara sprang the Ard-Rie Ereann Uili.”²⁷ The powerful clan that O’Grady had in mind, ruling over most of Ireland from the fifth to the eleventh century, was Uí Neill, traced to Niall of the Nine Hostages.²⁸

O’Grady draws this comparison between the Feis of Tara and the Festival of Olympus partly in the belief that the nobles of ancient Ireland and ancient Greece shared common physiological profiles:

[...] the history of Ireland, and indeed of all North-Western Europe, resembles that of Greece. In the times of which Homer sang, the Greek nobles had yellow hair and blue eyes. At the time when the heroic literature of Ireland was composed, the Irish nobles had yellow hair and blue eyes. Athene seized Achilles by the yellow locks, while she herself was a blue-eyed goddess. Crimthann, who held in check the rebellious sons of Cathair More for Conn of the Hundred Battles, was surnamed Culboy, because the smelted gold was not yellower than his hair; while the locks of Cuculain, the great Ultonian hero, were yellower than the blossoms of sovarchy.²⁹

This claim appears far-fetched and baseless, since it takes images in poetry and legend as sufficient evidence for true pictures of peoples of the highest caste living in different parts of Europe in ancient times. Edward Hagan argues that O’Grady believed in the Aryan myth of the origins of the modern northern European peoples, a myth that was widespread during the late nineteenth century.³⁰ In 1944, Knight Dunlap dismissed the Aryan myth as a completely modern and bogus invention with no basis to support its broadest claim: that a group called the Aryans invaded India at some time before the Christian era, after which descendants of these original Aryans migrated to India, Iran and Europe.³¹ By an odd coincidence, a book that is published in the same year as O’Grady’s *History of Ireland* provides an example of this spuriousness, most vigorously because of its conflation of linguistic and physiological categories. In his book, *Die Arier: ein Beitrag zur historische Anthropologia* [*The Aryans: a Contribution to Historical Anthropology*], Theodor Poesche identifies blonde hair and blue eyes with the original Aryans. In fact, he simply refers to the Aryans as “der blonden Race”.³² In the light of this and other publications on the topic, it is difficult to discount any influence of Aryan race theory in the physiological comparison that O’Grady makes between ancient Greek and ancient Irish nobles in *History of Ireland*.

ANCIENT IRELAND, GREECE AND ROME: HISTORY OF IRELAND: CRITICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL

In 1881, O’Grady published a work laying down his critical arguments for the value of Irish mythology, its concordance with elements in Greek mythology and its disclosure of aspects of ancient Irish history. Early in *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical* (hereafter, *Critical*

²⁷O’GRADY (1878) 43.

²⁸MACKILLOP (1998) 371.

²⁹O’GRADY (1878) 15.

³⁰HAGAN (1998).

³¹DUNLAP (1944)

³²POESCHE (1878) 12–23.



and *Philosophical*), he repeats the physiological comparison that he makes between the ancient Irish and ancient Greek nobility in *History of Ireland: the Heroic Period*.³³ However, it is mistaken to consider his sympathy for the Aryan theory, an idea widespread among scholars in Europe at the time in which he wrote, as the governing theory behind his various assertions. O'Grady makes a wide range of claims that are based on his knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman writings in conjunction with the knowledge of Irish mythology that he acquired subsequently from antiquarian publications. Foremost among these was the series of lectures that the Irish philologist, archaeologist and antiquarian, Eugene O'Curry, delivered at the Catholic University of Ireland in 1855 and 1856, published in 1861 as *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*.³⁴ The information in O'Curry's work supplies most of the materials in O'Grady's *History of Ireland*. As the reviewer of *History of Ireland* in *The Cork Constitution* newspaper stated,³⁵ O'Grady's work bridged the distance between the general public and the University academic scholarship of such works as O'Curry's *Lectures*.

In *Critical and Philosophical*, O'Grady brings his nineteenth century knowledge of classical literature to bear on some of the copious Irish archival materials that O'Curry introduces in his 1855–56 lectures. He does so not only to compare ancient Irish with ancient Greek narratives, but to elevate the significance of Irish mythology beyond Ireland itself. As noted above, Sylvester O'Halloran claimed that Diodorus Siculus's reference to the island of the Hyperboreans was an allusion to Ireland. O'Grady goes beyond this claim when declaring that there was a reference to Ireland in no less a work than Homer's *The Odyssey*. In Book 7 of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus tells Queen Arete that the gods carried him over the sea to the distant island of Ogygia, where the daughter of Atlas, Calypso, dwelt in isolation. He speaks of Calypso's warmth towards him and her promise to make him immortal.³⁶ On the basis of Plutarch's contention that the island of Ogygia lay to the west of Britain and because of "a prevailing tone of mingled awe and interest with which the more ancient classical writers" refer to the island, O'Grady contends that Ogygia was, in fact, Ireland. O'Grady was by no means the first writer to make such an audacious claim. In 1685, Roderic O'Flaherty declared Plutarch's Ogygia to refer in fact to Ireland rather than to some invented island to the west of Britain. O'Flaherty made his claim not only with reference to Plutarch but also to the work of the late-sixteenth/early-seventeenth century English antiquarian and topographer, William Camden.³⁷ In his volume on Ireland in his major work, *Britannia*, Camden took Ogygia to mean "very ancient", rendering Plutarch's island geographically and historically consonant with Ireland, a country that Camden identified as the oldest in the world.³⁸

O'Grady contends that readers should not be surprised that Homer knew of Ireland. He observes, correctly, that Orpheus of Croton refers to Ireland in his *Argonautica* as the island of Ierne. He mistakenly places Orpheus in the period of Pisistratus, however, a figure who ruled in

³³O'GRADY (1881) 15.

³⁴O'CURRY (1861).

³⁵REVIEW3 (1878).

³⁶FAGLES-KNOX (1996) 187.

³⁷O'FLAHERTY (1793) 34, translated by Rev. James Hely. For discussion of O'Flaherty's text as Orientalist pseudohistory, see, LENNON (2004) 58–60.

³⁸CAMDEN (1610) 3, 7. Available at: <https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/cambrit/irelandengl.html> (Accessed 19 September 2024).



Athens from 600 BCE to 527 BCE, thereby situating Orpheus close to, and possibly contemporaneous with Homer, testimony to the uncertainty over who Homer was exactly and when he lived.³⁹ O'Grady's alignment of *The Odyssey* with *Argonautica* is very wide of the mark. Dwayne Meisner states that, although a previous version of Orpheus and the Argonauts had roots in ancient Greek tradition, the earliest concrete evidence appears in a short passage in Euripides' *Alcestis* in the fifth century BCE.⁴⁰ According to Meisner, the *Argonautica*, to which O'Grady refers, does not appear until the fourth century AD. In truth, apart from Plutarch's claim over the location of Ogygia in *The Odyssey*, O'Grady's argument is speculative, part of an Irish tradition of pseudohistorical writing by authors like Geoffrey Keating, Roderic O'Flaherty and Charles Vallancey.

Other citations give a stronger basis to O'Grady's argument for awareness and respect for Ireland in the ages of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. He quotes a passage from the ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, in which the latter refers to an island that another Greek historian from the fifth century BCE, Hecataeus of Miletus, describes as beyond Gaul and under the Arctic Pole, as big as Sicily, and inhabited by the Hyperboreans, the people that Sylvester O'Halloran identified as the early Gaels. Hecataeus' description fits well with Ireland as a northerly island that had a moderate climate because of the influence of the Gulf Stream. Following Hecataeus, Diodorus Siculus describes the land as fertile and the people as worshippers of the God Apollo, their priest-caste dressing themselves as priests of Apollo. He also mentions a city on the island consecrated to the God Apollo, where harpists play music and sing songs in his honour. Additionally, Diodorus Siculus refers to Hecataeus's claim that the Hyperboreans admired the Greeks, with some Greeks having settled among the Hyberboreans and "left them diverse presents inscribed with Greek characters".⁴¹ O'Grady concludes: "The accumulated evidence pointing to the sacred and venerable character with which the ancients invested Ireland, along with the internal evidence contained in the foregoing quotation, sufficiently identifies this country [Ireland] with the mysterious island of Hecataeus."⁴² This reference is bolstered by a citation that O'Grady supplies from much later during the age of the Roman Empire, in which the geographer Rufus Festus Avienus refers to Ireland as "the Sacred Island, as our ancestors called it", mentioning its "abundant herbage".⁴³

In *Critical and Philosophical*, O'Grady supplements these claims for the significance in ancient Greek and Roman writings by making some comparisons between Irish and Greek/Roman figures from antiquity. He describes Deirdre, a beautiful young woman who appears in the Ulster cycle of tales, as "the Helen of the [Irish] heroic age".⁴⁴ He identifies the mythical race of Fir-Bolgs as giants who corresponded to the "Earth-born enemies of the Olympian gods in the traditional history of Greece".⁴⁵ He compares Lu in Irish mythology, the one whom the bards

³⁹O'GRADY (1881) 23. For debate over Homer's dates, see SAÏD (2011) 14–17.

⁴⁰MEISNER (2018) 4.

⁴¹Quoted in O'GRADY (1881) 25.

⁴²O'GRADY (1881) 26.

⁴³O'GRADY (1881) 26–27. J.P. Murphy translates the relevant lines from *Ora Maritima* as follows: "But from here, there is a two-day journey for a ship to the Holy Island – thus the ancients called it. This island, large in extent of land, lies between the waves. The race of Hierni inhabits it far and wide." MURPHY (1977) 9.

⁴⁴O'GRADY (1881) 32.

⁴⁵O'GRADY (1881) 67.



proclaimed to be the supernatural father of the warrior Cuculain, to Apollo in ancient Greece.⁴⁶ He describes Éire as the goddess of war, probably “an avatar of the Mōre Rigu”, O’Grady’s spelling for the Mórrígan or Morrighu, which translates as Great Queen, a figure whom James MacKillop describes as a “Goddess of war fury in early Irish tradition”.⁴⁷ O’Grady refers to the Morrighu on this occasion as “the Bellona” of the Irish heroic age, a Roman goddess of war. He also contends that the Irish practised a custom that the Romans associated with the British Celts, namely, according women positions of authority. He thus refers to two of the female Irish leaders, Queen Maeve and the lawgiver Brigamba, as Irish equivalents to Cartismandua and Boadicea, military leaders in England who fought the Romans.⁴⁸ O’Grady also makes a claim that is interesting for his notion of art and mythical narrative as conveying more truth about the past than document records. He contends that Homer’s Achilles and the city of Troy somehow felt more real than sixth century BCE ruler Histiaeus and the city of Miletus that he governed; just as Cuculain and the city of Emain Macha seemed more real than the tenth/eleventh century AD Irish warrior Brian Boru and the fort of Kincora, in County Clare, where he grew up.⁴⁹ O’Grady thus involves comparison between ancient Ireland and ancient Greece in developing his arguments for the historical relevance of Irish mythology.

CONCLUSION: AN ANCIENT FUTURE

Reactions to *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical* were positive, but with reservations. The review for *The Bookseller* criticised its lack of method, a view echoed in *The Tablet*.⁵⁰ The reviewer for *The Tablet* added, however, that O’Grady had grasped what it considered the genius of the Irish people, and had discovered several ideas underlying many Irish myths.⁵¹ The *Graphic* accentuated this positive reaction. The reviewer declared that the book should be of interest to all thoughtful English readers in disclosing how strongly Irish people, of little or no education, identified the heroes from Irish mythology as real people from ancient times. The reviewer found this feature of *Critical and Philosophical* important for understanding the bitterness on display in Ireland at the time of its publication, with anti-Government and anti-Landlord demonstrations widespread. The reviewer hoped that O’Grady’s work would find many readers: “even for the historical sceptic the creation of such a history as that of the ancient Irish is a notable phenomenon.”⁵²

Even more than the two volumes of *History of Ireland*, the reception of *Critical and Philosophical* suffered the impact of the Land War which dominated news of Ireland during the late 1870s–1880s. A second volume of *Critical and Philosophical* was never published, indicative of O’Grady’s dismay at the rather meagre attention that the first volume received and also in

⁴⁶O’GRADY (1881) 120.

⁴⁷O’GRADY (1881) 173–74. MACKILLOP (1998) 297.

⁴⁸O’GRADY (1881) 33.

⁴⁹O’GRADY (1881) 42.

⁵⁰REVIEW5 (1881); REVIEW6 (1881).

⁵¹REVIEW6 (1881).

⁵²REVIEW7 (1881).



recognition of the fact that the turbulent circumstances of Ireland in the 1880s were not conducive to the development of O'Grady's work. It would be another ten years before Irish writers began to draw upon his material in a widespread fashion, a cultural development for which O'Grady hoped in *Critical and Philosophical*. Then he expressed a conviction that future artists would find in Irish tales from the heroic age "the material of persons and sentiments fit for the highest purposes of epic and dramatic literature and art, pictorial and sculptural".⁵³ This is possibly the earliest explicit call for an Irish cultural revival, one that would take shape from the beginning of the 1890s. Driven by a desire to inaugurate a movement of this nature, O'Grady's enthusiasm for aspects of Irish mythology led him to exaggerate its significance when comparing it alongside that of ancient Greece and Rome, with which he was well familiar. This enthusiasm is at its most hyperbolic in O'Grady's adulation of the Ulster cycle of Irish mythology and its famous story of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. Comparing the ancient legends of the North of Ireland with those of ancient Greece, O'Grady makes the following audacious declaration:

An Irish bias may possibly affect my judgment in this matter, though I should be sorry, indeed, that truth should, in any way and for any object, suffer through this cause, but I cannot help regarding this age and the great personages moving therein as incomparably higher in intrinsic worth than the corresponding ages of Greece. In Homer, Hesiod, and the Attic poets, there is a polish and artistic form, absent in the existing monuments of Irish heroic thought, but the gold, the ore itself, is here massier and more pure, the sentiment deeper and more tender, the audacity and freedom more exhilarating, the reach of the imagination more sublime, the depth and power of the human soul more fully exhibit themselves.⁵⁴

Too many factors would need to be addressed to test the merit of O'Grady's judgment. Prominent among these is the matter of translation, since *History of Ireland* treats ancient Irish tales with its author dependent upon his sources for translational accuracy from the Irish language. O'Grady is correct in judging it impossible to sort out fact from fiction in tales of the events and personalities that survive from Irish antiquity, pointing to the barriers facing scholars who have done likewise with ancient Greek mythology.⁵⁵ O'Grady's position on this matter is accepted by scholars of modern times. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh states that "the history of early Irish narrative is not recoverable". However, Ó Cathasaigh also points out that the earliest manuscripts of the pre-Christian era Irish tales survive from a much later age than the events and figures narrated: they only appear in manuscripts composed near the end of the eleventh century AD. On this basis Ó Cathasaigh concludes that a lot of early Irish bardic literature has disappeared. In other words, the legacy is fragmentary rather than complete, casting in doubt the completeness that O'Grady perceived in the Ulster cycle in particular.⁵⁶

Ultimately, the importance of *History of Ireland* has less to do with antiquity than with the future as it appeared in O'Grady's time. He admits as much when conceding that Ireland's history did not carry anything like the significance of ancient Greece. He thinks of the importance of ancient Irish literature as a promise of a heroic future, one for which that literature was a prophecy.⁵⁷

⁵³O'GRADY (1881) 67.

⁵⁴O'GRADY (1881) 201.

⁵⁵O'GRADY (1881) 53.

⁵⁶Ó CATHASAIGH (2006) 24–25.

⁵⁷O'GRADY (1881) 59.



Late into *Critical and Philosophical*, he sees the movement of Irish history in dialectical terms, periods of ascension dependent upon the periods of declension that they replace. Acknowledging that Ireland was in an impoverished and weakened state at the time in which he was writing, he also felt certain that the country would regain its renown in the future. He added that a future age in which Ireland was at its finest would not be one of affluence and worldly prominence, but rather one in which the virtues that O'Grady most admired in Irish antiquity would come to prominence once more.⁵⁸ The comparisons that O'Grady drew between ancient Greek, Roman and Irish mythology were his means of bringing these virtues into the public domain in the hope of shaping the future course of Irish life according to them. Critics may object that these virtues had become obsolete in an age of industrial technology or that O'Grady was deliberately turning a blind eye to the material destitution that many thousands of Irish people faced in his time. However valid these positions may be, there can be no doubting the imprint that O'Grady's Hellenization of Irish antiquity left for a generation of writers and political figures in subsequent decades, among them such illustrious names as W. B. Yeats and Patrick Pearse, as Patrick Bixby notes, but also James Joyce.⁵⁹ After all, the shadow of *History of Ireland* lurks behind Buck Mulligan's imploration in the opening episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* that he and Stephen Dedalus do something for "the island" of Ireland: "Hellenise it".⁶⁰ This phrase is usually attributed to Matthew Arnold's idea of Hellenism in his 1869 work, *Culture and Anarchy*. In reality, O'Grady is a source much closer to home for what the boisterous Mulligan was proposing to the contemplative Dedalus on the morning of June 16, 1904, in Joyce's neo-Homeric modernist work. Such is the legacy of O'Grady's achievement for a modern era so distant from the ancient Ireland that he imagined along ancient Greek lines.

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⁵⁸O'GRADY (1881) 391.

⁵⁹BIXBY (2016) 242–43. For further discussion of O'Grady's influence, see CASTLE (2024) 34–36.

⁶⁰JOYCE (1992) 6.



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