

# The Aryan Myth: A Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Irish Will to Power

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Standish James O'Grady has frequently received an obligatory nod or footnote in histories of the Irish revival. Not noted, however, is the pattern of insistence throughout his work that the Irish are Aryans. This constant reference seems to have been a way in which O'Grady legitimated revival of the ancient bardic literature of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Study of the ancient Irish required a larger context, a more respectable (and oddly mystical though thought to be scientific) justification than any inherent, strictly Irish value it might have.

O'Grady's consistent passing reference to the Aryan Myth actually reveals how central that myth was to Irish nineteenth-century discourse. Indeed the pages of both the *Dublin Review* and *Dublin University Magazine* give ample evidence that the whole subject of primitive Aryan origins was a central concern of Irish intellectual activity. The Aryan Myth is actually much more: it is a touchstone for seeing the nature of the Protestant-Catholic divide – political, social, and religious – as it played itself out in the nineteenth century as well as a way of seeing a difference between the work of Joyce and Yeats in the twentieth century. Yes, it is really important to recognize Yeats's Protestant roots and Joyce's Catholicism.

- 1 The point here is that O'Grady was working within a nineteenth-century intellectual context that venerated Aryan origins. O'Grady's Aryan references reflect the 'invention' of Celtic Ireland – a Romantic concept that grew out of philological studies. Robin Flower, lecturing in 1927, has to clear away this 'new literature, largely poetical and not unjustly described as Neo-Celtic, which has imported a latter-day mysticism into the handling of the old matter. Flower thus shows that the intellectual context of O'Grady's endeavours to resuscitate early Irish literature made it difficult to recover a genuine picture of the early Irish: '... it is another matter when criticism begins to interpret the past in the light of these modern imaginations, and it is plain that much of the critical writing on Irish and Welsh subjects since the rise of the Romantic school has been dominated by this "Celtic" prepossession. The picture of Celtic literature drawn by Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold – neither of whom, I believe, knew any Celtic language – does not carry any conviction to those who read the original texts in their own setting, for it rests upon an artificial selection of subjects and episodes and, of necessity, can tell us nothing of those subtle and characteristic effects which the peculiar turn and idiom of a language lend to the handling of a subject' (Robin Flower, 'Ireland and Medieval Europe', the Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture, British Academy 1927 in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol xiii (1927), pp. 5-6).

O'Grady is particularly valuable because he sums up the Protestant Ascendancy so well. He saw himself as part of it and was involved in its politics. (He served as secretary of a Landlords' meeting during the Land War.) He was a leading article writer for the conservative Dublin *Daily Express* for approximately 25 years – from 1873 to 1898. He was educated at Trinity College, and his work shows the influence of its chief intellectual organ, the *Dublin University Magazine*, to which he contributed several articles in the 1870s. The range of subjects covered in the review from its inception in 1833 fits well with O'Grady's interests.

O'Grady is known mostly for his 1878 and 1880 two-volume 'bardic history'. In 1881 in his *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical* he traced a clear line between bardic literature and nineteenth-century enthusiasm for Aryan researches. O'Grady thought he could make a contribution to Aryan research by arguing that Irish bardic literature 'still lingers in the mountains which gave it birth. It is near the well-head'.<sup>2</sup> Thus early Irish literature offered Aryan researchers the opportunity of studying a stage in the development of Aryan culture that has become submerged in other countries. It is worth noting that O'Grady, at least in this instance (he was not always consistent or logical), believes in a common Aryan, blood-linked development of race. It is possible therefore to argue from one group of Aryans to the other.

It is also important to note that the 'well-head' is in the mountains and thus follows the commonly-accepted Aryan doctrine that the original Aryan race had its 'original seat among the highest elevations of Central Asia ...'<sup>3</sup> Such thinking also included the notion, discussed often in the *Dublin University Magazine*, that the Vedas in the original Sanskrit are seminal Aryan documents.

O'Grady even saw that the Irish could bolster the argument for a more westerly origin for the Aryans – a sort of sub-plot of the search for the Aryans. R.G. Latham, an English philologist, had argued in his 1851 study, *Man and His Migrations*, that the original Aryans had a more westerly home. Leon Poliakov, the author of *The Aryan Myth* – which was published in 1971 and is subtitled *A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, notes that the British could not brook the notion of Indian origins; perhaps their colonial interest made it difficult for them to accept an Indian origin for their ancestors, the Aryans. (O'Grady was naïve in thinking the British would be more comfortable with an Irish origin for the British Aryan ancestors.)

O'Grady maintained his belief in the Aryan nature of the Irish throughout his life, and his last work, *Arcadia*,<sup>4</sup> a utopian vision of Ireland, propounds a

2 Standish James O'Grady, *History of Ireland: Critical and Philosophical*, vol. i (London and Dublin, 1881), p. 53.

3 T.C. Irwin, 'The Origin and Source of Language' in *Dublin University Magazine*, lix (1862), pp. 749–55.

4 I have most of the unpublished manuscript of *Arcadia*.

dim view of Christianity that follows the pattern of nineteenth-century ethnology:

That universal and absolutely right and natural feeling of our Aryan ancestors has been obscured in more modern Europe by the prevalence of Semitic fanaticisms, the devotion to divers gods and demons made in the likeness of corrupt mankind; but it has been here always nevertheless; and always will be. The love of Nature, the all-Mother, has ever lain deep in the European heart.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note that O'Grady's words are anti-Catholic – the obvious reference to worship of images as well as the fact that the term 'Semitic fanaticisms' is consistent with the view of St Peter as a kind of religious reactionary presented in the *Dublin University Magazine*.<sup>6</sup> At the same time O'Grady alludes to nature as the 'all-Mother'. In Aryan tracts India is often called 'Mother' of the Aryans, and there is a whole gender issue here that requires further study. Suffice it to say that O'Grady is a sufficient indicator of the prevalence of the Aryan myth in Anglo-Irish thinking and that such thinking was popular, at least in part, because of its anti-Catholic undertones. John Rhys, writing in 1888, is quite pointed in connecting Aryans and Protestantism:

How, then, is it that the Aryan-speaking nations of Europe are so different, and how is it that they do not hopelessly stagnate, as the nations of the East? The answer is doubtless to be sought, to some extent at least, in the ever-acting stimulus supplied by the antithesis between the Aryan and the Anaryan elements in the composition of all the great nations of Europe ... after he [the pure Aryan] had slowly and reluctantly adopted Christianity, he eventually broke loose from the older forms of it, and developed a very different one in Protestantism which, making less of the priestly element, now prevails in all the countries where the Aryan blood is most copious.<sup>7</sup>

In Ireland, of course, there were doubts about the copiousness of Aryan blood among the 'native Irish,' a taint that Ernest Renan's *Poetry of the Celtic Races* had partially alleviated and had even 'helped' the Anglo-Irish to see the

5 Standish James O'Grady, 'Chap. 6: "Children and Animals"', typescript, pp. 5-6 (Standish DeCoursey O'Grady Collection).

6 See F.R. Conder, 'The Founder of Aryan Christianity' in *University Magazine*, xciii (1879), pp. 59-77.

7 John Rhys, 'Race Theories and European Politics' in *New Princeton Review*, v (1888), pp. 1-17.

native Irish as their fellow Aryans. (This fact helps to explain how O'Grady and other Anglo-Irish writers became 'Irish' for the first time.) The Aryan myth made possible a reconstruction of Anglo-Irish consciousness. The Ascendancy was under attack in the nineteenth century, and Protestantism had lost its informing power. O'Grady, following Carlyle, knew that his class had to find 'new clothes,' if it was going to maintain itself as an aristocracy. The Aryan Myth in the guise of Irish bardic literature was a suit that he tailored for Anglo-Irish resuscitation.

It is important to understand what the myth involved, and Poliakov offers a useful summary: the 'basic elements of the myth [were]: the emphasis on biology, the deserved triumph of the strongest, the pre-eminence of youth, the superiority of the Whites'.<sup>8</sup> Thus throughout Europe there grew up a kind of belief in an Aryan Manifest Destiny – *essentially a competitive ideal* – although there were those, O'Grady among them, who sometimes visualized a peaceful, rural, agricultural Aryan ideal. Dominance and religious progress were key ideas in the Aryan ideal as it developed in the nineteenth century despite the efforts of Max Muller, a German who was Professor of Philology at Oxford, and Ernest Renan to disavow the militarism that necessarily resulted from such an emphasis and that they themselves had engendered.<sup>9</sup>

In Ireland the Aryan myth offered O'Grady and other Anglo-Irish thinkers the opportunity of re-establishing the feudal relationship of the Ascendancy with the native Irish population – a way out of the Protestant-Catholic opposition. The Aryan Myth could be a new, Anglo-Irish 'will to power'.

However, not everyone was seeing the virtues of Schopenhauer for Irish thinking. Catholic writers in the *Dublin Review*, founded in 1836 soon after the *Dublin University Magazine*, could not buy the anti-Catholic bias of the Aryan myth and saw immediately that it required a progressive view of history in which the coming of Christ, while certainly an important event, was not a culmination of all human history. For Catholics, the only new event could be the Final Judgment – a world view that did not allow for the great, civilizing historical mission of the Aryans, the leading edge of progressive evolution. In criticizing two books by Edward Clodd (a protégé of Max Muller's) significantly entitled *The Childhood of Religions*, the reviewer in the *Dublin Review* delineates the difference in the Catholic position from the author's:

[Clodd's] theory on this point is very nearly the same as that of Auguste Comte, the chief difference being that, unlike Comte, he wishes to stop at the monotheistic stage, instead of going on to the Comtist ideal of perfection in which pure philosophy is to rule the world. Like Comte, he sees in fetish worship the beginning of religion on earth, instead of

8 Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth*, trans. Edmund Howard (New York, 1974), p. 197.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

regarding it as we do, as the lowest point of degradation of religion, not the starting point in its upward progress.<sup>10</sup>

That upward progress did not continue beyond the coming of Christ in the Catholic view. W.E. Addis, a Catholic writing in the October 1880 issue of the *Dublin Review*, in criticising Ernest Renan's *Lectures on the Influence of the Institutions, Thought, and Culture of Rome, on Christianity and the Development of the Catholic Church*, points directly at his fellow Christians, 'the Protestant orthodoxy,' and says that it 'is losing its hold on society, and giving way beneath the powerful solvents of foreign infidelity'.<sup>11</sup> Addis was specifically pointing to the threat posed by Renan – whom Poliakov calls the 'chief sponsor of the Aryan myth in France' – but he was also alluding to Max Muller and other German critics who espoused a dim view of a so-called 'Semitic Christianity'. (FR. Conder's 1879 article in the [*Dublin*] *University Magazine*, is entitled 'The Founder of Aryan Christianity' and lionizes St Paul – the Protestant Aryan hero – as opposed to St Peter – the Catholic Semitic hero.) The views of the German critics were rooted in the Aryan doctrine that saw Christianity as but an epoch in the larger and more important history of the Aryans. The Semites had contributed monotheism, but (Renan argues) they 'have nothing further to do that is essential'.<sup>12</sup>

It was for this reason that in 1863 Renan published a new Bible, his *Life of Jesus*, that placed Christianity in the proper Aryan context. A series of Aryan Bibles followed by Jules Michelet, Louis Jacolliot and others. All denied divinity to Christ and placed him in the role of martyr by Semites or Jews, not in the role of deity. All agreed in seeing a glorious Aryan past. Poliakov describes this:

Jacolliot was able 'to ascribe the origins of the Bible to the highlands of Asia and to prove that, the influence and memories of the birthplace having been prolonged throughout the ages, Jesus Christ had come to regenerate the new world as Iezeus Christna had regenerated the old'. The Old Testament was regarded by Jacolliot as no more than a collection of superstitions, the Jews as a degraded and stupid people, and Moses as a 'fanatical slave charitably educated at the court of Pharaohs'.<sup>13</sup>

Addis's article is a fascinating Catholic polemic: he argues that Rome's domination of the Western World was divinely approved because it made pos-

10 'The Childhood of Religions' in *Dublin Review* o.s., xci (1882), pp. 331-54.

11 W.E. Addis, 'The Truth and the Falsehood of M. Renan's Lectures' in *Dublin Review*, lxxxvii (1880), pp. 333-59.

12 Ernest Renan in Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, p. 207.

13 Poliakov, *Aryan Myth*, p. 209.

sible the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem and, with it, the demise of the conservative Judaizers led by Peter, who in Addis's estimation would have kept the Church within narrow Jewish bounds. Thus the Church was forced to become 'catholic' – a Church for everybody – and the Roman empire was the structure divinely prepared for spreading the Church to all peoples.<sup>14</sup>

Addis thus attacks the nationalism that was ironically being fuelled by the transnational Aryan doctrine. (We do know how it finally worked itself out in Nazi Germany.) His argument is that:

Rome did Christianity another service, and that one more important still. Her universal empire had destroyed the spirit of patriotism; Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, had lost even the memory of freedom, the republics of Greece which would have crushed Christianity had vanished, even at Rome patriotism survived only in a few of the ancient families. Hence room was made for a religion 'which was from the first the denial of any earthly country'. More than this, the absence of political struggle, the fact that politics had ceased to create enthusiasm or even interest, threw men back on themselves, and made them willing ears to moral and religious teaching.<sup>15</sup>

Addis thus has propounded one of the Catholic ideas that has always mitigated Irish nationalism although the British and the Protestants have been incapable of recognizing that the Roman Church wanted Irish Catholics to be Roman Catholics first. (George Bernard Shaw pointed out this blindness in his preface to *John Bull's Other Island*.) In short, the Roman Church was the cure for Irish nationalism if only the power structure would see it.

More importantly, Addis was laying the groundwork for a way out of the Protestant-Catholic opposition. He saw that Renan's Aryan doctrines and Protestantism promoted nationalism whereas the Roman Catholic Church staunchly opposed it. Addis says, 'Protestantism has always exhibited itself as a national religion; or to put it more accurately, the different religions which have been known under the common name of Protestant, have always been national'.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, among Irish Catholics there was a long memory of acts that did not suggest that Protestantism made Christians more civilized. While barbarism was not limited to the acts of some Irish Protestants, George

14 K.L. Ulrichs made the same point in *Dublin Review* in 1839 – some 41 years before Addis. 'The Romans', he argues served 'as an instrument of Providence to render the human race, (saving the inhabitants of Palestine,) by the universality of Grecian and Roman elements, ripe and ready for the Christian religion'; K.L. Ulrichs, 'Roman History' in *Dublin Review*, vii (1839), p. 69.

15 Addis, 'M. Renan's Lectures,' p. 337.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 345.

Crolly, writing in the *Dublin Review* in 1847, compares them unfavorably with the 'conventional savages' of the nineteenth century, who demonstrated greater 'civility': 'The remains of the dead were in general treated with respect by pagan nations, as well as by the patriarchs and the Jews'.<sup>17</sup> Irish Catholics thus were open to more positive views of foreign 'others' while the Aryan Myth was confirming the inherent superiority of the Ascendancy over those 'others'.

Addis's article is typical of many that appeared in the *Dublin Review* for many years. Staunchly polemical, the journal usually opposed the prevailing rage for Aryan researches on the grounds that they denied the supernatural nature of the Christian religion.<sup>18</sup> Catholics emphasized divine revelation, and, in taking credit for 'religious evolution,' the Aryan enthusiasts were making religion a human invention that the Aryans were perfecting. Thus, the *Dublin University Magazine*, the journal associated with Trinity College, enthusiastically catalogued the human progress of the Aryans with frequent discussions of India, Sanskrit, and progress in the study of philology, and with numerous articles on Germany, which are suggestive of real adulation for all things German.

A curious adjunct to the journal's interest in all Aryan subjects is the frequency with which it published articles on theosophy and mysticism throughout the nineteenth century. Ernest Boyd has told us that in the 1890s the Irish Theosophical Society was important because it was a place for Irish intellectuals to meet.<sup>19</sup> The interest in the occult by the Ascendancy class is consistent with an interest in Aryan doctrine since it is precisely Aryan doctrine that many occult systems parallel. For example the Theosophical Society of India to this day preserves as its central dogma the reconciliation of all religious dogma in an evolution back to an original unity that bears a great deal of resemblance to the notion of Aryan origins in the mountains of India.

17 George Crolly, 'The History and Antiquities of Ireland' in *Dublin Review*, xxiii (1847), p. 483.

18 W.S. Lily, in reviewing in the *Dublin Review* a number of books on the East including collections of translations of sacred Eastern texts edited by Max Muller, argues for divine inspiration of Eastern sacred books and therefore denies that they are solely of human invention. Unlike the derogatory remarks typical of the Aryan progressive advocates, Lily quotes Cardinal Newman to argue the merit of the Eastern sacred books: 'surely the spirit in which we should approach these "Sacred Books" is clear enough. Hidden in every one of them we should delight to trace "something [Newman says] that could lift up the human heart from the earth to a higher world, something that could make men feel the omnipresence of a higher power ..."' The most degraded fetish worshipper seems to me wise and venerable beside the Atheist, equipped with all the culture of this enlightened age. The votary of Mumbo Jumbo, at least, has retained that power of looking up to something higher than faith and reason supply, which is lacking to the Materialist of nineteenth-century Europe, into whose soul, as he gropes amid the beggarly elements of corruption, death has entered' (W.S. Lily, 'The Sacred Books of the East' in *Dublin Review*, xci [1882], p. 31).

19 Ernest Boyd, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance* (New York, 1918), pp. 212-213.

That the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy was interested in both the occult and the Aryan myth is a conjunction of interests that may reveal the insecurities of a ruling class that was losing its grip. It is not hard to see how these fascinations indicate that the Ascendancy was compensating for its loss of power, purpose, and ideology. O'Grady accused the aristocracy of losing its way, and indeed its shocked inaction during the famine and subsequent vacillation during the land wars qualified the class as defunct and in need of an injection of new life.

Study of the occult held out the illusory promise of secret knowledge. Hope of secret and powerful knowledge drove many Anglo-Irish intellectuals (most notably AE) to espouse theosophical studies in the hope of connecting with the well-head of original knowledge.

The Catholic view of the Church as being for everyone fits quite well with James Joyce's pluralism. Given the prevalence of the Aryan myth, it is not surprising that a Catholic Joyce would create a polygenetic hero of *Ulysses* with a bit of everyone in him – Irish, Semite, Hungarian, Catholic, Jew, Protestant. One meaning of HCE is 'Here Comes Everybody'. Vincent Cheng's recent book, *Joyce, Race and Empire*, has clearly presented Joyce's internationalism. It is worth noting that Joyce's Catholic heritage qualified him to see the world more as Addis did than as O'Grady would have had him do. As a recent reviewer, Daniel Schenker, of a book on Joyce noted, 'Joyce's dissent from the Church was not rooted in an essential hostility or indifference toward religion. Joyce's complaint against the Church was more that it was not *religious enough*'.<sup>20</sup>

Yeats's 1894 play, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, on the other hand, may be read as a compendium of much nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish, Protestant/Aryan thinking, but Yeats's irony undoes its will to power. The play's conflict is between the ambiguously attractive, youth-endowing, faery religion of 'old' Ireland and a stultifying Catholicism. Mary Bruin, the play's central character, is described as being 'too much in the old book'<sup>21</sup> – a reference to the ancient Irish religion but, not inconceivably, by extension to the Aryan Bibles as well. Mary chooses life with the faeries over the continued entrapment of life with her mother and father and Shawneen of a husband. Yeats shows the flaws of Irish domestic life, complete with the negative figure of a priest who has no real spiritual understanding and who cooperates in giving power to the faery child who succeeds in taking away Mary Bruin. The priest removes a crucifix from sight, and Yeats is specific: it is a crucifix, not simply a cross, and thus the priest is removing the image of Christ crucified – a Catholic object of veneration.

The play embodies a Rosicrucian view of the cosmos (and therefore is quite consistent with Aryan thinking). The faery child refuses wine and asks for

20 Daniel Schenker, review of *Ulysses and the Irish God*, by Frederick K. Lang in *Studies in the Novel*, xxvii (1995), p. 226.

21 W.B. Yeats, 'The Land of Heart's Desire' in *The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (New York, 1952) p. 35.



milk, which is given to her once she is carried across the threshold and thus into power over the Bruin household. For Rosicrucians (and we know that Yeats was steeped in Rosicrucianism in the 1890s) a key act in the life of Christ is the wedding feast of Cana where Jesus changed water into wine. Rosicrucians believe that Christ came to dull the senses of some humans (not the apostles, to whom he imparted esoteric knowledge that Rosicrucians claim to possess), and thus the act of changing water into wine suggests his stultifying power.<sup>22</sup> Since the fifth epoch of humanity is the Aryan Epoch, Rosicrucians view Christ enigmatically.<sup>23</sup> While he dulled human consciousness with wine (in the play Shawn Bruin fetches wine saved from a Spanish, and therefore Catholic, wreck for his mother), Christ also took his apostles up on the mountain and gave them secret knowledge. (Mountains are the original home of the Aryans.) It is this secret knowledge that the Rosicrucians claim possession of: it is remarkably similar to the Aryan progressive view of religion. Moreover this version of Christ's work helps to explain how Catholicism is a Semitic fanaticism while at the same time Christianity was progress for the select Aryans who heeded St Paul and moved away from the Semitic St Peter.

Rosicrucians see the Christian epoch much as the espousers of the Aryan Bibles did: it was a Semitic stage in the evolution of the Aryan story. Rosicrucians believe that humans live several lives and seek to return to an original unity. The third epoch of Rosicrucian history is the epoch of milk drinking. In asking for milk, the child in *The Land of Heart's Desire* is seeking return to that earlier stage in the evolution back to original oneness.

Yeats thus has worked out in *The Land of Heart's Desire* a dramatic return of a passionate woman to a more attractive, but not particularly attractive, previous dispensation or epoch. Further devolution or retrogression is required. Notably her salvation involves rejection of marriage governed by the church to her husband, rejection of the greasy till, rejection of an unimaginative, restricted, prudish life, and a return to the ancient religious traditions of Ireland. Yeats's dramatic resolution thus recapitulates the pattern of nineteenth-century glorification of an Aryan past – in his Ireland this vision secures a reborn, newly unified Irish triumph over the death of the Ascendancy class. Of course, Yeats's vision of triumph is ironic – Aryan 'improvement' results not in dominance, but in the restoration of ambiguity.

22 Max Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception or Mystic Christianity* (Oceanside, CA, and London, 1937), pp. 165–72.

23 Max Heindel's description of the Rosicrucian 'Cosmo-conception' bears extraordinary resemblances to the Aryan Myth. He specifically labels Christianity as Aryan and progressive: '... as Christianity is the religion of the most advanced Race, it must be the most advanced Religion, and because of the elimination of this doctrine [the laws of Consequence and Rebirth] from its public teachings, the conquest of the world of matter is being made by the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic races, in which this phase has been carried the furthest' (ibid., p. 168).