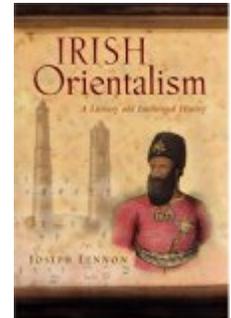


Joseph Lennon. *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004. xxxi + 378 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8156-3044-9.



Reviewed by Michael Silvestri

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In 1975, the Indian Institute of Advanced Study published a posthumous work by the eminent Irish scholar of Celtic studies, Miles Dillon, entitled *Celts and Aryans*. In it, Dillon detailed the similarities between ancient India and Ireland, ranging from linguistics to epic poetry to social customs. Dillon (the son of John Dillon, the last leader of the Irish parliamentary party) also expressed the hope that Ireland and India's shared modern legacy of British imperial rule would lead scholars to explore further the similarities between their cultures and histories. "The common heritage that India and Ireland share should be a bond between them," Dillon concluded.[1]

Dillon's comparisons of druids and Brahmins, and Irish and Sanskrit would seem to suggest a scholar plowing a lonely and slightly eccentric path. In actuality, Dillon was working within a tradition of Irish intellectual and cultural thought that extends back to the early Middle Ages. This discourse on the relationship between Irish and various Asian cultures is the subject of Joseph Lennon's important new study, *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History*.

Many scholars have noted the affinity of members of the Irish Literary Revival for the culture and philosophy of "the Orient," and analyzed how this related to their views on Irish culture. Much has been written, for example, on how W. B. Yeats's wide-ranging interests in Indian literature and philosophy, ancient China and the "aristocratic" cultural traditions of the Japanese helped to shape his conception of a vanishing Celtic Ireland desperately in need of cultural revival (p. 247). Yet Lennon observes, "Long before it was treated as Celtic, Irish culture was linked to the "Orient" (p. xv). For centuries, a tradition of textual links between Irish and "Oriental" cultures "served as an important imaginative and allegorical realm for Irish writers and intellectuals" (p. 1). In an insightful and wide-ranging analysis, Lennon examines the trajectory of various strands of Irish Orientalist writings from ancient times to the twentieth century.

The first part of *Irish Orientalism* probes the historical origins of the idea of Irish affinity with the East, from classical and Irish medieval writings to the work of late-eighteenth-century anti-

quarians, early-nineteenth-century romantic writers and, later, Irish academic Orientalists. The second half examines how this legacy was deployed and reshaped in the writings of members of the Irish Literary Revival, notably Yeats, George Russell, James Stephens and James Cousins. Along the way, Lennon also examines how Irish nationalists utilized this tradition of Irish Orientalism in order to make "cross-colony" analogies with Asian nationalists, particularly those from India.

While Lennon's intellectual debt to and engagement with the work of Edward Said is clearly acknowledged, *Irish Orientalism* also builds upon—and considerably expands—the work of scholars such as Javed Majeed, who have demonstrated how Orientalism was far from a unitary discourse.[2] Lennon demonstrates that Irish Orientalism did not simply replicate Anglo-French or German constructions of the East, but also drew on a centuries-old tradition of Irish writings about the Orient. In the Middle Ages, this took the form of legendary accounts of the origins of the Irish. The collection of medieval texts known as the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, for example, chronicles successive migrations of Eastern peoples to Ireland, culminating in the Milesians, whose origins were traced to Egypt, and who, for medieval chroniclers, were "the personifications of the most recent and identifiable Gaelic ancestors of the medieval Irish" (p. 35).

The idea of the Eastern origins of the Irish also found much support in the works of eighteenth-century antiquarians, who debated the "Scytho-Celtic" and "Phoenician" theories of Irish origins (p. 84). The British Army officer Charles Vallancey, chief surveyor of Ireland and one of the founders of the Royal Irish Academy, for three decades argued passionately for the Phoenician origins of the Irish; he also posited similarities between the round towers of Ireland and Hindu temples in India. Many of Vallancey's conjectures were, however, constructed on the shallowest of archaeological and linguistic foundations, and met

with a skeptical response from contemporary scholars. Indeed, beginning in the early nineteenth century, these Eastern origin legends of the Irish were disproved as authentic historical accounts of Ireland's past, yet they continued to resonate in Irish culture. The reason, as Lennon suggests, was that the work of writers like Vallancey "confirmed a vision of Ireland as an independent, ancient, remote and non-European culture" that accorded with the beliefs of nationalists seeking to assert cultural as well as political independence from Britain (pp. 90-91).

While Irish Orientalist thought was well established by the twentieth century, not surprisingly, it was never a unitary field of knowledge. To be sure, little that Irish academic Orientalists produced "contradicted the general idioms and doctrines of Anglo-French Orientalism, or the tendencies of European colonialism" (p. 188). But the Irish poet James Cousins, who receives an extended and insightful treatment from Lennon, represents a different model of Irish Orientalism. Originally drawn to India through his involvement with the Theosophical Society, Cousins converted to a reformist sect of Hinduism, was involved in Indian educational and cultural movements, and wrote poetry and plays in which Indian and Irish mythology was blended. At the core of Cousins's engagement with Indian culture was a firm belief in the "shared sensibilities between Celtic and Oriental peoples" (p. 352). As Lennon observes, "Historically ... Irish Orientalism was both a way to participate in imperialism and a way to deny it. It offered a path of resistance (disguised or obvious) as well as, at times, a path of collusion" (p. xxxi).

Irish Orientalism was, however, rarely characterized by stark divisions between anti-colonial and pro-imperial strands, and Lennon resists the temptation to divide Irish Orientalist texts "into binary camps of imperial or anticolonial, nationalist or unionist, Protestant or Catholic, Anglo-Irish or Gaelic Irish" (p. 372). Instead, Lennon shows how tightly linked these different elements

of Irish Orientalism often could be. The Irish modernist writer James Stephens, for example, in spite of his nationalist, socialist and generally anti-colonialist sympathies absorbed and reproduced stereotypically Orientalist ideas about Indian society based on ancient conceptions of caste *varnas* (p. 310). As Lennon notes, Irish Orientalists at times "perpetuated stereotypical understandings of India promoted by Indians and romantic Orientalists, believing such understandings to be part of an anticolonial and antimodernist aesthetic or philosophy." Thus, the construction of the "mystical Hindu" had great appeal to Celtic Revivalists in the early twentieth century, who correlated it with an equally ahistorical vision of the "dreamy, mystical Celt" (p. 311).

In general, Lennon has more to say about anti-colonial deployments of Irish writings on the East than on Irish contributions to imperial visions of the Orient. Certainly, Irish imperial servants such as the Calcutta judge Whitley Stokes and Indian Civil Service member George Grierson (both of whom wrote about Irish as well as Indian society) get much less attention than the writers of the Irish Literary Revival.

This is not, however, meant to underplay the depth and richness of the material that Lennon provides. His notes and bibliography acknowledge not only research in primary sources, such as rare Indian nationalist newspapers and the unpublished correspondence between the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore and the Irish poet James Cousins, but also wide reading of the works of both historians and literary scholars who have analyzed the issue of Irish involvement with the British Empire on various levels.

In another sense, Lennon's focus on the imaginative dimensions of Irish Orientalism is entirely appropriate. On a personal level, as Lennon notes, Yeats and Tagore's relationship was often marked by tension and cultural misunderstanding. In spite of his respect for Yeats, Tagore was not an admirer of his poetry. Yeats in turn had little un-

derstanding of modern India and imagined Bengal as a land free from Sinn Feiners, an ironic remark when revolutionary nationalists there were avidly reading Irish nationalist texts such as Dan Breen's *My Fight for Irish Freedom* (1924) (p. xxx). Yet Yeats's linkage of "the Celtic" with "the Oriental" was a powerful and consistent element in his work.

On the whole, Lennon succeeds admirably in mapping the different strands of Irish Orientalism and their influences. *Irish Orientalism* will be essential reading for scholars seeking to understand the cultural dimensions of Ireland's involvement with empire in the modern period and the persistent identification of Ireland with "the East" as well as the West. As Lennon notes in his conclusion, "At the center of the Irish diaspora, and in the bones of an international Irish identity, has lain the unspoken suggestion that to be Irish is to differ from the norm" (p. 371). *Irish Orientalism* is an important window on this sense of Irish "difference."

Notes

[1]. Myles Dillon, *Celts and Aryans: Survivals of Indo-European Speech and Society* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1975), p. 146.

[2]. Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's The History of British India and Orientalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), especially pp. 87-122.

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