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Archbishop Ussher and Gaelic Culture

J.T.H. LEERSSEN

James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, seems a somewhat contradictory figure nowadays. His eminence as a historian and collector of manuscripts (including the Book of Kells) is well known, and we still remember the high regard that his contemporaries had for him. But his actual achievements as an antiquary and a church historian are largely forgotten and tend to be obscured by the anecdotal point that he computed a biblical chronology which fixed the date of the Creation at 4004 BC. This type of endeavour has incurred some post-Darwinian condescension; but we should realize that in its day it signalled a revolutionary shift (from the theological towards the historical) in scriptural research.

Within the Irish context, Ussher is also remembered as a leading figure in the national, cultural and religious politics of his time. Attitudes here are, again, mingled. Attempts have been made by Catholic authors to reclaim this eminent scholar from Protestantism, and the rumour (most probably unfounded in fact) has often been repeated that Ussher converted to Roman Catholicism on his death-bed. On the other hand, he has been execrated as a bigoted anti-Catholic and, what is worse, as a staunch enemy of Gaelic culture.¹ It is especially Ussher's supposed opposition to Bishop Bedell's translation of the Old Testament into Irish which has branded him, in the eyes of posterity, as one of the most implacably anti-Gaelic elements among the pre-1641 Anglo-Irish. Thus, it is mainly as Bedell's adversary that Ussher is mentioned in widely-used textbooks of Irish literary history such as Douglas Hyde's *Literary history of Ireland* which tells us that Ussher's 'desire to see the Irish and their language crushed and *in extremis* was stronger than the desire to make Protestants of them'.² The charge even found its way into the

¹The Gaelic and the Catholic cause have become identified to some extent in the dogma of Pearisian nationalism. Aodh de Blácam went to some length to vindicate the case of some members of the Protestant, Anglo-Irish classes who took a genuine interest in Gaelic culture, and mentions Ussher as an example — not, however, without at the same time piously repeating the old rumour of his death-bed conversion. ('The Other Hidden Ireland', *Studies* 23 (1934) 439-54, esp. 446-7).

²D. Hyde, *A literary history of Ireland* (2nd ed. London and New York 1967) 619-20. Hyde's attitude is echoed by de Blácam, who in the aforementioned article in *Studies* states that Ussher 'opposed Bedell's Gaelic aims' (p. 446). In de Blácam's *Gaelic Literature Surveyed* (2nd ed. Dublin 1973) 236-7, it is said that Ussher was 'hostile to the native learning'.

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Encyclopaedia Britannica which (although the article on Ussher was rewritten for the recent *Micropaedia*) through repeated editions contained the statement that Ussher 'obstructed Bishop William Bedell's plan to translate the Bible into Irish'.

The allegation is, in fact, quite untrue, and is based on what is obviously a misinterpretation of a letter from Ussher to Bedell by his nineteenth-century biographer and editor C. R. Elrington. In this letter, Ussher berated Bedell for 'the course you took with the Papists' in the following terms:

... neither do I remember in all my life, that anything was done here by any of us, at which the professors of the Gospel did take more offense, or by which the adversaries were more confirmed in their superstitions and idolatry.³

Bedell's answer expressed bewilderment at this cryptic language:

My lord, all this is a riddle to me. What course I have taken with the Papists; what I have done, at which the professors of the Gospel did take such offense, or the adversaries were confirmed . . . as the Lord knows, I know not.⁴

But 350 years later, Elrington's solution was decisive enough:

... it is very evident to what the Primate alluded. The censure was upon the Bishop's attempt at converting the Irish, by translating the Scriptures into the Irish language, and by circulating a short catechism with the Irish and the English on opposite pages.⁵

This interpretation is arguably erroneous and was challenged from the start, for instance by the Presbyterian historian J. S. Reid.⁶ We have comparatively early testimony such as that of the eighteenth-century Protestant John Richardson concerning Ussher's approval of the use of Irish for purposes of proselytization.⁷ But Elrington's

³Ussher to Bedell, 23 Feb. 1629 (Old Style; i.e. 1630). In C. R. Elrington (ed.), *The whole works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D., Lord Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland* (Dublin, 17 vols., 1847-64; hereafter referred to as *Whole works*), vol. 15, p. 473.

⁴Bedell to Ussher, in *Whole works* 15, 485.

⁵*Whole works* 1, 118.

⁶J. S. Reid, *Seven Letters to the Rev. C. R. Elrington, D.D.* (Glasgow 1849), 36-8.

⁷Richardson, 'A Vindication of Arch-Bishop Usher's Opinion, concerning the Performance of Divine Offices to the Irish in their own Language', appendix to the second edition of Richardson's *A short history of the attempts that have been made to convert the Popish natives of Ireland to the establish'd religion* (Dublin 1713) 155-67.

interpretation is definitively demolished by a later letter from Bedell to his friend Samuel Ward, which describes his reconciliation with Ussher; on this occasion, Bedell tells us, Ussher explained that his criticism concerned the fact

that I seemed to come neare the Papists in certaine Instructions which I had given touching reading prayers in Irish, about the signe of the Crosse, and the presence of Christ in the Sacrament.⁸

The point of disagreement clearly concerned church policy and ceremony rather than cultural politics. But although Bedell's letter to Ward has been available in print since 1902, the Archbishop of Armagh has long continued to carry the stigma that Elrington's hasty conjecture had imposed on him. The case for Ussher's defence was not put forward fully and cogently until 1968.⁹

Only now that the Archbishop stands cleared of the charge of cultural imperialism, can we hope to attempt a less biased assessment of his achievements in the field of Gaelic learning and antiquity. We need no longer regard Ussher's interest in these matters as an inexplicable contradiction; and indeed the indications are that he was aware, and in active support, of Bedell's translation project.¹⁰ We may now fully appreciate the fact that Ussher freely drew on Latin sources of Gaelic learning for his own antiquarian research (he gives, for instance, numerous well-informed etymologies of Gaelic placenames in his ecclesiastical history); and this staunch Protestant showed remarkable courtesy and helpfulness to Catholic Gaelic scholars. Connel Mageoghegan, translator of the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* and host of Michael O'Clery, used and copied the Book of Lecan that Ussher had lent him; the guardian of the Franciscan monastery in Dublin, Thomas Strange, and the Provincial of that same order, Francis Matthews (or O'Mahony) were at liberty to draw on the primate's collections and forwarded materials gleaned from Ussher's library to the Franciscan centre of Irish hagiographical activities at Louvain: through these channels, Ussher and Luke

⁸ Bedell to Ward, 14 Aug. 1630. In E. Schuckburgh, *Two biographies of William Bedell* (Cambridge 1902) 317.

⁹ By W. O'Sullivan, in *Irish Historical Studies* XVI, 12 (Sept. 1968) 215-19.

¹⁰ When Bedell's Irish-speaking assistant Murtagh King (Ó Cionga) had been deprived of his benefice by an intrigue, Bedell mentioned Ussher as a reference for King's character. In 1628 Bedell spoke openly to Ussher about his translation, about King's assistance, and even asked for Ussher's help in order to obtain Nehemiah O'Donnellan's Irish translation of the psalms. Cf. Schuckburgh, *op. cit.*, 296.

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Wadding exchanged information for their respective work.¹¹ Moreover, Ussher himself joined in the drive against the chauvinistic Scottish pretensions of Thomas Dempster, who had claimed a Scottish nationality for many medieval Irish saints; in this, he was at one with Thomas Messingham, to whose *Florilegium insulae sanctorum* he repeatedly refers in his own work, without any apparent embarrassment at the fact that Messingham was a leading recusant. Likewise, he exchanged information with the Catholic Bishop of Ferns, David Roth, and with the Jesuit Stephen White; he pays handsome tribute to Roth as a 'patriarum antiquitatum indagator diligentissimus'¹² and repeatedly stresses his indebtedness to White as to a "viro antiquitatum, non Hiberniae solum suae sed aliarum etiam gentium scientissimo".¹³ The case of White is especially interesting in that he belonged to a religious order whose very name had, to the Protestant of that day, a particularly lugubrious and frightening ring. We can therefore only draw the conclusion that, whatever Ussher's views as a churchman were concerning the position of Protestantism in the Kingdom of Ireland, his views as a scholar and antiquary were marked by genuine collegiality and respect for learning and scholarship — a respect that was obviously stronger than any religious prejudice and which does credit to all those scholars concerned.

The implication of these facts is evident. Ussher was among the very first scholars outside the living tradition of native Gaelic culture to whom some of its riches were beginning to spread; and, as such, his position was one of crucial importance.

The fact that Gaelic learning had traditionally been confined to a small group of aristocratic, hereditary intellectuals was to prove a death-trap in the years after the Flight of the Earls. The learned Gaelic tradition found some refuge in the continental monasteries, but this continental tradition went into a decline as its one driving ideology, the counter-reformation, ebbed out: its last monuments were abbé James Mageoghegan's *History of Ireland* and Bishop John O'Brien's *Irish-English Dictionary*, which appeared in Paris in the mid-eighteenth century. Within Ireland, the long and slow social decline of the poets

¹¹ Cf. B. Jennings, *Michael O'Clairigh, chief of the four Masters and his associates* (Dublin and Cork 1936) 41 ff. and 81; R. Buick Knox, *James Ussher Archbishop of Armagh* (Cardiff 1967) 36 ff.; RIA MS 23 D 9, also *Catalogue of the Irish mss in the Royal Irish Academy*, 415.

¹² *Whole works* 4, 425.

¹³ *Ibid.* 5, 458.

and men of learning ended in the destitution inflicted by the Penal Laws.

The process by which much of the lore of these scholars was salvaged from the collapse of its social setting is fairly well known within the Irish context: the patronage that Anglo-Irish men of learning extended to Gaelic scholars is exemplified by names like Ware and Molyneux, MacFirbis and O'Flaherty. The activities of the latter-day scholars of the eighteenth century, from Aodh Mác Cruitín to Charles O'Connor, took place within the framework of an Ascendancy Ireland which gradually lost its fear of things Gaelic and began, after 1760, to evince a genuine and sympathetic interest in the ancient culture whose heirs were languishing under the Penal code. Ussher's importance for this gradually growing interest among the Anglo-Irish lies mainly in his mentorship of young Sir James Ware, and in the fact that the library of Trinity College, the most important depository for Irish manuscripts until well after the foundation of the Royal Irish Academy, initially owed much of its importance to his personal collections.

The aspect of Ussher's importance which I would like to stress here, however, transcends the narrowly Irish context. Not only the Anglo-Irish began to take interest in things Celtic; indeed, the sudden upsurge of interest in Gaelic culture among the Anglo-Irish after 1720 (Bishop Nicolson, Walter Harris, Henry Brooke, down to Charles Vallancey) stands in a remarkable contrast to the isolated figures of Ware and Molyneux in the preceding century — a contrast which can only be understood if we recognize the stimulating influence of non-Irish forces such as that of Lhuyd (*Archaeologia Britannica*, 1707) and Leibniz (*Collectanea etymologica*, 1717). Direct links can be established between the post-bardic Gaelic tradition and Edward Lhuyd (e.g. Francis O'Molloy's grammar, or Roderic O'Flaherty); but Lhuyd's seminal work, which for the first time demonstrated the familiarity between the Goidelic and Brythonic languages, cannot be seen in isolation from the tradition of early European linguistics and proto-Celtology; this tradition dated from the opening years of the seventeenth century, when the universities on the Continent had begun to exhibit a growing interest in the possible relationships between different languages.

The old biblical model, in which Hebrew was the God-given original tongue from which others had split away after Babel or in the vagaries of the sons of Noah, was not able to support the confrontation with the wealth of linguistic data which was being elucidated at



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the time.¹⁴ Of course, the Bible still remained the central point of reference for all forms of learning, and it is small wonder to see that the most important linguistic research was undertaken by biblical scholars. Especially the Protestant emphasis on the importance of establishing an uncorrupted text of both Old and New Testament and of furnishing faithful translations into the vernacular for the edification of the people, led to thorough philological investigations of the various extant versions and to a growing acquaintance with new languages from Coptic to Iranian. The similarities that certain languages showed, as opposed to the radical differences between others, could not but be noticed and led to questions and hypotheses which sooner or later would have to tackle the position of Irish in whatever new linguistic models were tentatively suggesting themselves.

Scaliger had defined the starting position by combining the known European languages into a number of coherent, but mutually unrelated radical families.¹⁵ Irish and Welsh had, in this model, no mutual affinity but were (like other "fringe" languages such as Finnish and Basque) each seen as individual linguistic entities. Starting from this model, other scholars (like father and son Buxtorf, Heinsius and Casaubon the elder) began to adduce further data; and Ussher's voice was one that did not go unheeded in this venerable company. His prestige was such that Richelieu had offered him a French state pension and religious immunity, and especially his contacts with the university of Leyden (where he was offered a chair) are of importance. It was here that the most progressive linguists were collecting and collating their information; it was here that works like Van der Mijl's *Lingua Belgica* and Cluverius's *Germaniae antiquae libri tres* appeared in 1612 and 1616; it was here that a new linguistic model was being worked out which, with its concept of "Scytho-Celtic" as the primeval European language, marked the beginning of the long road towards later insights into Indo-European connections.¹⁶ Of central

¹⁴ An excellent survey of the development of early linguistics is given by D. Droixhe, *La linguistique et l'appel de l'histoire, 1600-1800* (Genève and Paris 1978). Droixhe, however, does not refer to Ussher; nor do more specifically celtologically oriented surveys such as G. Bonfante's 'Contribution to the History of Celtology' (*Celtica* 3 (1956) 17-34) or V. Tourneur's *Esquisse d'une histoire des études celtiques* (Liège 1905).

¹⁵ Diatriba de Europaeorum Linguis, in his *Opuscula varia* (1610).

¹⁶ Sir James Ware, incidentally, was aware of these continental developments, partly, no doubt, through his personal friendship with the French philologist Samuel Bochart. Thus, he writes at the beginning of his *De Hibernia et antiquitatibus ejus disquisitiones* (London 1654): 'Scytharum nomen, apud antiquissimos scriptores



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importance in this development was the work of Marcus Boxhorn around 1650; he drew on John Davies's Welsh-Latin dictionary of 1632 in order to prove that Welsh was part of the "Scytho-Celtic" complex. This insight liberated Welsh (as well as Cornish and Breton, whose familiarity was too obvious to be overlooked) out of the linguistic isolation in which it had been left by Scaliger: that of the Gaelic languages, however, was to persist until the beginning of the eighteenth century, when, after some preliminary work by the Breton priest Pezron and, possibly, by the Inishowen freethinker John Toland,¹⁷ the familiarity between Irish and Welsh was proved by Edward Lhuyd and the implied importance of Irish for comparative philological and antiquarian research was recognized by Leibniz. This recognition raised the status of Irish from that of an obscure, peripheral vernacular to a European language of high antiquity, and thus provided a sanction for scholarly research which noticeably stimulated the boom of Irish studies later that century.¹⁸ It should not be forgotten, then, that the eighteenth-century Gaelic revival among the Anglo-Irish was largely based on the preparatory work of men like Boxhorn, on whom both Lhuyd and Leibniz drew directly, and on the activities of the Leyden school. It is here that Ussher played a part that was not very conspicuous but remarkable nevertheless.

Ussher was a recognized authority throughout Europe on various Semitic languages such as Arabic, Syriac and Chaldaean and corresponded regularly with the Leyden scholar Lodewijk de Dieu on these matters, as well as on scriptural questions and on the research of contemporaries like Scaliger, Vossius, Heinsius and Buxtorf the elder. De Dieu's own interests were concerned with a different achievement of the Leyden philologists, namely the elucidation of affinities between Iranian and the Germanic languages.¹⁹ The most important name in

valde generale fuisse docti nōrunt, ac Scythas Europaeos, sive Celto-Scythos colonias variis temporibus in Hiberniam misisse' (p. 2). It is interesting how even in this early context the position of Irish elicited scholarly interest: in the same work, Ware discusses the question whether 'lingua Hibernorum veterum . . . eadem fuerit cum Britannica' (ibid. p. 6: Title to chap. 2). Ware refers to Boxhorn in this context.

¹⁷Toland claimed that he pointed out the affinities between Irish and Welsh to Lhuyd while staying at Oxford; cf. Toland, *A critical history of the Celtic religion* (Edinburgh 1815 ed.) 69, 236-54. See also R. T. Gunther, *Early science at Oxford* vol. XIV: *The life and letters of Edward Lhuyd* (Oxford 1945) 217, 278.

¹⁸Leibniz' estimate of the philological importance of Irish (*Collectanea etymologica* (Hannover 1717) 153-4) was quoted, for instance, as the motto of Bishop O'Brien's *Focalóir Gaoidhíle — Sax-Bhéarla* (Paris 1768), and in the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Dublin* (Dublin 1808) 8-9.

¹⁹Cf. De Dieu's own *Animadversiones in veteris testamentis libros omnes* (1648).

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this context is that of Johann Elichmann, a Silesian who worked in Leyden as a physician and whose *Tabula Cebetis* appeared there posthumously in 1640.²⁰ Ussher was kept informed by De Dieu on the progress of his and Elichmann's research and showed considerable interest; a copy of a Persian MS given to him by Elichmann was among his most cherished possessions,²¹ and the moral encouragement of the Irish primate awakened in Elichmann an interest in the possible relationship between Persian and Irish. De Dieu asked Ussher for an Irish-Latin or Latin-Irish dictionary on Elichmann's behalf in a remarkable letter of which the following passage is worth quoting:

Quum . . . coeperit [sc. Elichmann, J. L.] paulatim linguam Germanicam per omnes ejus dialectos, Latinam item et Graecam cum Persica conferre, quippe quae cum istis, praesertim cum Germanica nostraque Belgica ingentem, quod experti loquimur, affinitatem habeat, Irlandicae quoque genium explorare cupit, si haec fortassis propius caeteris ad eam accedat. Non gravabitur, spero, dignitatem tuam verbulo monere, num quid Irlandice exstet, quod in usum ejus facere possit, et qua via comparari queat.²²

Ussher's answer is no less remarkable. He sent a copy of Daniels's Irish version of the New Testament as well as an Irish 'Alphabetum',²³ whilst regretting the fact that there was no printed dictionary available to him which could fulfill Elichmann's original request:

Quo minus autem ipsius desiderio de dictionario Hibernico satisfacere possim, hoc in causa est, quod nullum adhuc habeamus hujus linguae lexicon sive per se factum, sive cum alia lingua comparatum, saltem non typis editum. Alphabetum tamen Hibernicum atque integrum Novum Testamentum una cum hisce transmitto: siquid inde adjumenti capere possit amicus ille tuus, aut verius noster. Est quidem lingua haec et elegans cum primis, et opulenta: sed ad eam isto modo excolendam (sicuti reliquas fere Europae linguas vernaculas intra hoc seculum excultas videmus) nondum extitit hactenus qui animum adjaceret.²⁴

A few things may, I think, be concluded from this passage. Ussher's sincere regret at the obscurity of, and lack of interest in, Irish as one of

²⁰ It was edited by Saumaise, a correspondent of Boxhorn and better known for his controversy with John Milton.

²¹ *Whole works* 1, 245.

²² *Ibid.* 16, 13.

²³ Possibly Bedell's Irish-English catechism of 1631 (*Aibgitir* . . .) or Kearney's earlier, similar catechism of 1571 (*Aibidil* . . .).

²⁴ *Whole works* 16, 25.

the European vernaculars is expressed quite forcefully; his praise of Irish as an elegant and opulent tongue reflects an attitude closer to that of the Franciscan grammarians from O'Hussey to O'Molloy than to that of Anglo-Irish authors like Stanihurst; most importantly, however, this letter indicates that Ussher played an active part in that process of the dissemination of the Gaelic cultural heritage to non-native Irish, which later on would prove to be such an important condition for its very survival. Both Ussher's and Leibniz' statements concerning the Irish language — one the beginning, the other the conclusion of a century-long endeavour to recognize its European appurtenance and importance — were used gratefully by later students and scholars to justify their pursuits. Such Protestant scholars, though working in the friendly and optimistic climate of pre-Union patriotism, still had to suspend a strong social and religious disaffection in order to pursue their aims — not only in the opposition shown by more bigoted fellow-Protestants like John Pinkerton or Sir Richard Musgrave, but also in the friction that was inherent in their own relationship with the Catholic part of the population. The result was not only the discovery of a national culture practically at the very point of its expiry, but also a certain trend, temporary alas, towards the conciliation of a sadly divided country.

It seems to me that the *fons et origo* of this scholarly suspension of social and religious enmity was none other than James Ussher. More than merely the precursor of Sir James Ware, and everything but the cultural imperialist he has been made to seem, Ussher should be recognized as the man whose achievements and prestige as antiquary and philologist, both within and outside Ireland, as well as his scholarly disinterestedness, created not a few of the conditions necessary to salvage a cultural heritage from the ruins of the disintegrating Gaelic order.

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