In search of the Celtic sunrise

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Abstract

In his speech, Professor Donaldson, an academic [in mathematics] who wore a kilt, recalled that the Vikings were driven out of Scotland in the 12th century by the grandfather of the first Donald of the clan and his men.

“He would have wondered why he went to so much trouble when, some eight centuries later, we take account of today’s union between the Viking Frederick and Mary of the McDonald clan.”

Citing Robert burns, he reminded his new son-in-law that making a happy “fireside clime” was the “true pathos and sublime of human life.”

*Sunday Age, 17 May 2004, p. 11; report of wedding of Mary Donaldson of Hobart to Prince Frederick of Denmark.*

The Celtic revival in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century was accompanied by an insistence on the Celtic twilight of Irish mysticism and mythology. The Scots renaissance in the early twentieth century was accompanied by a similar harking back to a past, this time enshrined in the Scots rather than the Gaelic language, when the people made their own history. Similar recoveries of the past were attempted in Wales and Cornwall. In all cases the coming of the English was seen as the occasion of the catastrophic breach in continuity. Migration to Australia produced a further break, with the loss of any connection with the ancestral language as a result. As Australians have tried to recover their own origins, they have tended to assert the importance of the earlier breach and to see migration as one of its consequences. David Tacey has even asserted that Celtic traditions could provide European settlers with a complement to Aboriginal mythology, and so heal the spiritual wounds of the act of settlement. On the other hand, Vincent Buckley denies any common Celtic heritage, and some historians deny the existence of the Celtic peoples altogether. This paper will argue that the Australian writers who in the later part of the twentieth century became interested in Celtic origins were trying to fill a perceived absence in contemporary Australia rather than come to terms with either the Celtic past or the reality of the Scots or the Irish present.