

Race, Space, and Politics in Mid-Victorian Ireland: The Ethnologies of Abraham Hume and John McElheran

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ABSTRACT: There has been much scholarly debate about the significance and influence of racist thinking in the political and cultural history of nineteenth-century Ireland. With reference to that ongoing historiographical discussion, this paper considers the racial geographies and opposing political motivations of two Irish ethnologists, Abraham Hume and John McElheran, using their racist regimes to query some of the common assumptions that have informed disagreements over the role and reach of racial typecasting in mid-nineteenth-century Ireland. As well as examining in detail the racial imaginaries promulgated by Hume and McElheran, the paper also argues for the importance of situating racist discourse in the spaces in which it was communicated and contested. Further, in highlighting the ways in which Hume and McElheran collapsed together race, class, and religion, the paper troubles the utility of a crisp analytical distinction between those disputed categories.

The racialization of the Irish in the nineteenth century has long been a topic of scholarly investigation and debate. The work of Perry Curtis on caricatures of the Irish in British periodicals was among the earliest examinations of the influence of racial typecasting on the construction of Irish identity in the nineteenth century.¹ In his *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, Curtis argued that from the 1840s, images of the Irish in comic newspapers increasingly drew on physiognomy and racial science to portray their subjects as under-developed, misshapen, and dangerous Celtic Calibans. According to Curtis, such portrayals subsequently fed into debates about Home Rule in the 1880s, providing a ready resource for those who wished to argue that the Irish were not capable of self-government.

These claims were quickly challenged by those skeptical of “race” as an explanatory category for understanding Irish political history. Among others, Roy Foster and Sheridan Gilley queried the representativeness of negative portrayals of the Irish in the Victorian period.² Class and religion, rather than race, were argued to be of greater importance for understanding British attitudes towards Ireland. It was noted, too, that those attitudes varied considerably and were a dynamic mélange of positive and negative judgments of Irish character and the Irish situation. Responding to these criticisms, other scholars have issued revised statements of Curtis’s arguments, insisting that racialized representations were indeed an important part of Irish political reality in the nineteenth century. In his extensive study of nineteenth-century depictions of the Irish in the British press, Michael de Nie argued that negative stereotypes of the Irish in Britain were remarkably persistent and culturally potent.³ Luke Gibbons, too, reformulated Curtis’ arguments and suggested that the form of racism experienced by the Irish, while not the same as the virulent kind meted out against African Americans, was analogous to attitudes towards Native Americans. For Gibbons, this “softer” form of racism nevertheless abetted extraordinarily harsh programs of exclusion and extermination.⁴ These refashioned versions of Curtis’ thesis have, in turn, been strenuously challenged. In a 2005 article, for example, Gary

Peatling questioned again the influence or “throw” of racial depictions of the Irish on political decision-making and queried the adequacy and accuracy of comparisons drawn between the treatment of, and attitudes towards, Irish and non-white races during the nineteenth century.⁵

Much of this historiographical debate has centered on the relative importance of racialist conceptions of the Irish by “outside” observers. A related body of work on the construction of racial identity among an Irish diaspora has helped to bring into view Irish self-perceptions. Noel Ignatiev’s controversial thesis that “the Irish,” rather than identify with African Americans or other marginalized communities, “became white” to secure better employment and social standing in nineteenth-century America, has attracted considerable attention.⁶ John Belchem’s study of Irish Catholics in Liverpool during the long nineteenth century has highlighted some of the negotiations around race that shaped the development of a distinct and dynamic ethnic identity.⁷ Attitudes in Ireland towards what were taken to be distinctive racial groups have also been given some attention in recent work examining the anti-imperial rhetoric employed by the Irish nationalist press.⁸ This work has demonstrated that sympathy for subjugated peoples elsewhere in the world was an important, if inchoate, component of Irish nationalist discourse.

This paper offers a different and neglected entry point into nineteenth-century discussions about Ireland and race by examining two little-studied Irish ethnologists for whom race was a central explanatory category for understanding Irish culture, society, and politics. Writing in the 1850s, Abraham Hume and John McElheran, although guided by dramatically different scientific and political convictions, argued that Ireland’s population was composed of distinct racial groups. Among other things, their work demonstrates the difficulties involved in assessing the relative importance of a “racial” component in political and cultural debates about Ireland in the mid-Victorian period. Although race was given an analytical priority in the projects pursued by Hume and McElheran, it was inextricably tied to judgments about class and religion.

As well as advancing our understanding of the nature of racial thinking in mid-Victorian Ireland, this paper underlines the importance of geography for comprehending racialized accounts of Ireland, and does so in at least two ways. First, for both racial theorists, constructing a vividly imagined geography of racial difference was a crucial concern. Hume in particular was aware of the methodological and conceptual kinship between mid-Victorian geography and ethnology, and mapping the distribution of racial groups was a key part of his ethnological project.⁹ McElheran, by contrast, did not make use of cartography, but he similarly aimed to produce a graphic account of racial difference at a local, regional, and global scale.

Questions of geography are argued to be important in a second sense. Rather than rushing to position the ethnological interventions of McElheran and Hume within a general narrative of the cultural politics of race in nineteenth-century Ireland, care is taken to situate those interventions in the specific intellectual, cultural, and political spaces where they were first articulated and discussed. This is not necessarily to deny the possibility or importance of working towards more general claims. It is to suggest, however, that the historical geographies of nineteenth-century discussions about the racialization of the Irish have to be taken seriously. Doing so will prevent the recalcitrant and radically contingent character of racial discourse from being smoothed over in the heat of historiographical debate.

The paper proceeds by reconstructing in turn the ethnological proposals made by Hume and McElheran. Following this, a closing section will reflect on the differences and similarities between the racialist views of the two ethnologists and highlight the ways in which their projects disrupt some common assumptions about the nature and influence of racialist thought in nineteenth-century Ireland.

Establishment ethnologies: the racial politics of Abraham Hume

Abraham Hume (1814-1884) was born in Hillsborough, County Down and was educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, Glasgow University, and Trinity College, Dublin. In 1836, he was appointed Head of the English School at Belfast Academy. Five years later he moved to Liverpool, taking up a position at the Mechanics' Institution and then, from 1843 at the Collegiate Institution. In the same year, Hume graduated with a BA from Trinity College and went on to take holy orders in the United Church of England and Ireland, and in 1847 he was appointed Vicar of the Parish Church of Vauxhall, Liverpool.¹⁰ Within his own family, his commitment to the Established Church was a matter of serious concern. His grandfather had been a Presbyterian minister in Hillsborough and his family remained resolutely committed to that tradition.¹¹ Whatever the impact of this private disagreement, Hume became an outspoken advocate of the Anglican Church in England, Ireland, and beyond.

Hume's interest in science developed early. He excelled in scientific as in other studies while a pupil at the Belfast Academical Institution and was involved as a young man in the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society. He gained "first honours" in the science department at Trinity College, Dublin on several occasions and, on moving to Liverpool, became a leading member of the town's Literary and Philosophical Society.¹² During his first few years in Liverpool, Hume also became enmeshed in controversies over the anonymously authored evolutionary tract, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*.¹³ For Hume, the book represented a distinct threat to the vital alliance between the Established Church and science, and it contravened scientific principle by propagating inferences not based on fact. The danger of the book also lay in its novel-like qualities, a literary genre that, in Hume's view, encouraged mental atrophy.¹⁴ The same appeal to "bare facts" marked Hume's subsequent work on ethnology and social statistics. These projects also represented the practical outworking of Hume's commitment to consolidating the influence of the Church through scientific study.

Hume's commitment to facts and disavowal of speculative science was a typical rhetorical posture, not least among enthusiasts for what were known as moral statistics. As Theodore Porter has argued, statistics was "in many ways the characteristic social science of the mid-nineteenth century," and its emphasis on the empirical rather than theoretical made it especially attractive to urban reformers.¹⁵ Hume's interest in the statistical analysis of social change, particularly with reference to race and religion, first emerged in 1847 on his appointment as incumbent of "the new district of Vauxhall," a particularly impoverished area of Liverpool. Hume's survey of thousands of households was designed to demonstrate the need for further church extension and additional resources for densely populated urban areas.¹⁶

In 1852, Hume turned his "eye for facts" back to Ireland and to ethnology. In a paper delivered in Belfast to Section E (Geography and Ethnology) of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Hume charted the "origin, characteristics and dialect of the people of the counties of Down and Antrim." Hume's presentation ranged widely, but at its heart was an attempt to demonstrate that the counties under study had been a vital influence on the "the destinies of the human race" in both Britain and Ireland. The main agents of this influence were the Anglo-Saxons, which Hume divided into two distinct, because long-separated, branches: the English and "Scotch." Creed, "habit," and surnames were all used to map the distribution of these two sub-racial groups. The English were Episcopalian, the Scottish, Presbyterian. In English districts there was "more comfort and tidiness," and while the "Scotchman" was "often more intelligent than his English neighbour he rarely excelled him in weight of character." It was these two groups that had shaped and civilized Ireland's northeast corner. The third racial element, the "native Irish," was by implication of little consequence in the illustrious history of Antrim and Down.¹⁷

Hume's paper formed the basis of several articles that appeared in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (UJA) between 1853 and 1859. As Hume noted, the UJA had been launched after the British Association's meeting in Belfast and on the back of an exhibition of Irish antiquities organized for that occasion. Edited by the Belfast antiquarian Robert Shipboy MacAdam, it was "open to the discussion of all disputed subjects in Irish archaeology," and ethnology was very much on its agenda. The journal's prospectus noted that "distinct races of men [...] effected settlements in the district, whose lineal descendants remain." It noted, too, that Ulster was distinctive in being, "the last part of Ireland which held out against the English sway," a phrasing that sat uncomfortably with Hume's views of the special significance of Ireland's northern province.¹⁸

The first of Hume's articles, a much-expanded version of the opening sections of his paper to the British Association, appeared in serial form in the first volume of the UJA. In it Hume set out to describe the topography, physical geography, and social conditions that characterized the counties of Down and Antrim before and shortly after the plantation of Ulster.¹⁹ His detailed chorographical descriptions served a larger purpose and the over-riding aim was to show that Antrim and Down were, like the biblical Canaan, regions of plenty, which had been barren and uncivilized before the arrival of Anglo-Saxon colonizer. The customs and laws of the "native Irish" had prevented any significant development, making the influx of Anglo-Saxon settlers both desirable and necessary. The long-term effect of the plantations, and the later "numerous Protestant accessions," was a province that was no longer Irish in any sense except "geographically." Ulster, in ethnographic terms, had become a "parish" of "Anglo-Saxondom." As a result, "every rood of land" had risen in "moral importance and commercial value."²⁰ Hume's original intention had been to "show the peculiar locality for each set of people, native and foreign" after the first wave of colonists had arrived and settled. As it turned out, he restricted the final third of his account to English settlements.²¹ This, as will become clear, reflected his own concerns to demonstrate the central and civilizing role that the Anglican Church had played not just in Antrim and Down, but also in Ireland as a whole.

In an article published in the UJA three years later, Hume did map in more detail all three of the major racial groups that he believed made up the population of Antrim and Down in the seventeenth century (see Figure 1). Hume's racist chorography of Antrim and Down was strongly colored by the environmentalism that typified much mid-nineteenth-century ethnology. Racial traits were a function of climate and "circumstance," a fact that made necessary an inquiry into the relation between people and "the districts which gave them birth."²⁵ That did not mean that race was essentially transient or plastic. Racial character, along with education and society, were "powerful operating causes" in human history. The history of the peopling of Ireland also suggested to Hume that some racial groups were more permanent than others. Echoing a widely held view, Hume noted that certain immigrants to Ireland had become "more Irish than the Irish." Others like the "Saxons in England made the name, the language and the institutions of the country their own." The "native Irish," like the Saxon, also seemed to have become a fixed and permanent variety. Hume suggested that living in boggy tracts had "poisoned their energies" and made them little different from "mere animals."²⁶ Yet it seemed, following Hume's allusions to Ireland's "bog trotters" and "back-of-the-hill folk," that they had become permanently mired in their own inferior state.²⁷

Hume's close attention to the ethnology of Down and Antrim later widened out into a consideration of Ireland as a whole. In a long pamphlet published in 1864, Hume analyzed the results of the 1861 census of Ireland in part to defend the record and relevance of the Irish branch of the Established Church. The pamphlet was dedicated to the "advanced radical" MP Lewis Dillwyn in the conviction that Dillwyn's knowledge of the Church in Ireland was not equal to his "zeal [...] for alleged reform."²⁸ In order to mount a defense against Dillwyn-style calls for

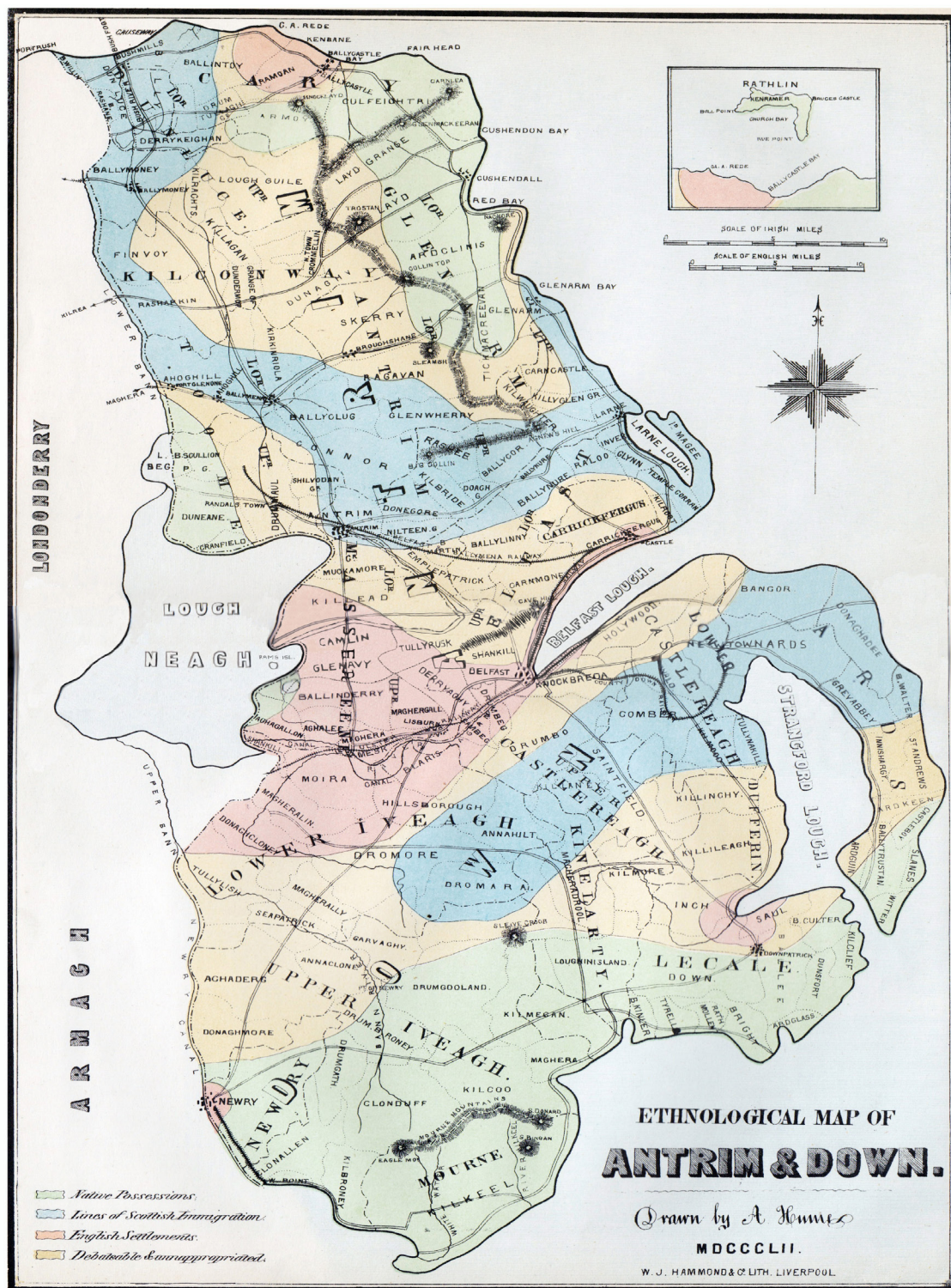


Figure 1. Abraham Hume's Ethnological Map of Antrim and Down. Published in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 4 (1856) between p.155 and p.156. The green tint represents "native possessions"; the blue tint, "lines of Scottish immigration"; the pink tint, "English settlements"; and the yellow tint, "debatable and un-appropriated."

disestablishment, Hume catalogued the relative distribution of Ireland's three main religious groupings: Roman Catholics, members of the Established Church, and Presbyterians. This demonstrated that, while Roman Catholics were by far the largest group, the Established Church was best placed to "leaven" Irish society, given its presence across the entire island. To remove it, or to lessen its influence, would be to abandon Ireland to social decay and wholesale political rebellion. The epigraph chosen for Hume's pamphlet—lines from Thomas Moore's poem "Erin, oh Erin"—was not ironic despite the enthusiasm for Moore's verse among Irish nationalists. Hume clearly believed that Ireland would indeed "shine out when the proudest shall fade," due to the civilizing influence of the Established Church.²⁹

For all the importance of religion in Hume's analysis, it is clear that race, too, played a significant role. As we have seen, it had long been Hume's conviction that in Ireland race and religion were interchangeable.³⁰ The English Saxons were members of the Established Church, the Scottish Saxons were Presbyterians, and the Irish Celts were overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. It was the Celtic Catholics—or "the wretched kerne of the south and west"—who were an "impediment to improvement," and not simply because they owed allegiance to a "foreign potentate."³¹ In racial terms, they were constitutionally unsuited to occupations much beyond the unskilled and menial. To illustrate this, Hume constructed from census results a "social pyramid" that demonstrated, to his satisfaction, that "in Ireland there are vocations which are specially Roman Catholic or Celtic."³² Ireland's Protestant Saxons, on the other hand, were singularly suited to occupations concerned with property, law, and government. The English Saxons in particular were the "cream of the Irish milk pot" and had retained the "emerald gem" for the crown of Great Britain.³³ Hume summarized his findings as follows: in Ireland "ethnology and creed on the one hand illustrate and are illustrated by occupation and social grade on the other."³⁴

Hume's racial analysis surfaced more strongly still in his conclusion. There, he attacked advocates of the "equality of human nature" (which, he announced, "only had to be distinctly stated to be universally denied") and, by analogy with the unthinkable idea of "surrender[ing] supreme power" to the slave populations of South Carolina and Mississippi, argued against acceding to Irish demands for self-rule. Like emancipated slaves, the Irish—though not "negroes"—were just as far from the moral, intellectual, and social maturity exhibited by Protestant Saxons.³⁵ The demanding task at hand was, "*as far as possible*," to bring them up to the Saxon level.³⁶

Hume's argument that the Celtic race in Ireland was not beyond improvement but remained far from the Saxon stage of development made him note, further, that the "great difficulty" in Ireland for the English Church and State was not the "mild, docile and gentle" Celt but "Romanized Normans exported from England" who had been "perverted" from their original Protestant faith.³⁷ Racially superior to their Celtic co-religionists, such converts to Roman Catholicism could mount a substantial challenge to the Anglo-Saxon clergyman intent on winning Ireland back to the ancient and "ante-papal" (even anti-papal) faith of Saint Patrick.³⁸

Among other things, Hume's racially charged religious geography of Ireland highlighted the pivotal role of Anglican outposts in otherwise Celto-Catholic areas. This ethno-religious vision, buttressed by the cartographic rhetoric of double spread maps, provided the basis for a religious geopolitics readily mobilized to serve a more global remit. The parishes of many parts of Ireland were, for Hume, more like remote mission stations than the settled and secure benefices of England. Reflecting on the challenges to "clerical labour" in ten parishes in western Connaught, Hume brought to mind "a foreign land" and, to find an equivalent example, pointed to the work of the government chaplain of Lima, Peru.³⁹

As it turned out, the allusion to South America was particularly appropriate. Three years after his analysis of the 1861 census, Hume acted as a "surveyor" for the South American Missionary Society. His "tour" of South America mapped out a moral geography of religious

toleration with Chile proving to be the most receptive to Anglican missions and the establishment of Protestant communities. The explanation lay in a long history of interaction with Europeans in general and "the English" in particular.⁴⁰ As well as mapping the relative receptivity of the continent to Protestant mission, Hume's survey also helped determine "centres for action" most suitable for basing communities of English missionaries.⁴¹

Although Hume imported his racist views into his work on Christian missions, it is important to note that he did not do this consistently or in a sustained way. Strikingly, his many studies of the religious geography of Liverpool make little or no reference to racial concerns.⁴² This was in spite of the fact that Hume was more aware than most of the large numbers of Irish Catholics residing in Liverpool. Whatever the reasons for this silence, it is clear that Ireland remained for Hume the geographical pivot for his ethnographical inquiries. Ireland, not England, provided the ethnological facts on which to base a defense of the Established Church of England and, especially, Ireland.

John McElheran and the transcendental Celt

On the same day in September 1852 that Abraham Hume delivered his paper to the Geography and Ethnology Section of the British Association on the peoples of Antrim and Down, a Belfast surgeon, John McElheran (d. 1859), penned a letter addressed to the Association's ethnologists. In it he attacked the "popular theory that England is Anglo-Saxon, and therefore great." The premise that England was Anglo-Saxon was, McElheran insisted, entirely mistaken. The Saxon invasion did not exterminate the Celtic Britons but was, instead, absorbed by the indigenous and superior Celts. Over the subsequent centuries "Celtic men," far from remaining "cooped up in corners," became the backbone of Britain. Shakespeare, it turns out, was a "good specimen" of the Celtic character. The only pure Saxons left were the miners of the North-East of England, set apart by their "complexions, features and general structures." The rest of the population shaded towards the Celtic type. These claims were made on the back of a "complexion census" McElheran had undertaken over a period of ten months in various British towns and cities. Admitting the small sample size of his own surveys, McElheran ended his epistle by calling the Association to sponsor an inquiry into Britain's racial makeup. The end result would not only be a boon for ethnological science, but would also "break down the prejudices and invidious distinctions of race."⁴³

McElheran's letter appeared several days later in the pages of the *Northern Whig*, a leading Belfast newspaper dedicated to liberal and reformist causes. It was also reprinted in the Dublin-based and politically nationalist *Freeman's Journal*. Beyond that, however, it attracted little attention, and less than a month later McElheran tried again to garner public interest in his subversive ethnological theories. In a letter published in the *Times*, McElheran launched a stinging assault on the "Saxon lie" promulgated by the newspaper at the expense of the downtrodden Celt. Once again, McElheran announced that Saxons were in a diminishing minority. Against a dominant view, McElheran asserted that "the greatest men who adorn English and Scottish history had Celtic characteristics." What was more, the "god-like Anglo-Saxon" that the *Times* had "hawked around the world as an object of worship" was the product of an "infidel material theory of race" that was to blame for "assassinations and oppression in Ireland" and for sectarianism everywhere.⁴⁴

On this occasion, McElheran's views prompted widespread discussion. The *Times* responded at length to McElheran's "black and thick" abuse, dismissing the accusation that it had ever promoted the idea that the English were Saxon. It was, in fact, the mixed character of the English-born cosmopolites that made them versatile, practical, and virtuous. If the term "Saxon" had been employed by the *Times* writers, it was for the "settlers in Ulster" or "importations

from the Lowlands of Scotland." In the final analysis, it was only the "average Irishman" who approached racial purity, being "by universal admission a Celt."⁴⁵

Other publications picked up on the exchange and pronounced their own judgments. *Punch* reprinted choice quotes from McElheran's letter, illustrating them with sketches of a "small-brained, prowling Anglo-Saxon" and a "true Tipperary man" (see Figure 2).⁴⁶ For the *Punch* writer and artist, no further comment was needed—McElheran's reversal of stereotypes was patently absurd. The *Belfast Newsletter*, a paper sympathetic to the Protestant Establishment, dismissed McElheran's imagined "triumph over the anti-Celtic ethnologists of the London press" and presented him as "the most fatal specimen of the Celt that the enemies of that race could possibly seize upon as an illustration of his arguments."⁴⁷ In complete contrast, a number of Irish nationalist newspapers trumpeted McElheran's letter as a glorious triumph. The *Freeman's Journal* declared that the letter had "hit the raw" and forced from the *Times* a "pettifogging" denial that it had ever suggested that the English were Saxon, despite the "thousand living evidences in type of his own columns against him."⁴⁸ The *Tipperary Free Press* called the *Times* response a "snivelling apology" made from a "lying lip" and praised McElheran's matchless rhetorical prowess.⁴⁹

McElheran's letter to the *Times* and the responses to it have been previously noted and discussed. Conor Carville describes McElheran's ethnological interventions in 1852 as evincing a "spectral ethnicity" that combined a "realist" or scientific posture with a "gothic" (but manifestly not, for McElheran, Gothic) fascination with the unreal. Drawing on the work of Homi Bhabha, Carville presents McElheran's text as a hybrid discourse uneasily moving between the real and unreal and containing within its own insistence on an essentialized Celtic identity an "occult" recognition of a more contingent and non-essential account of cultural difference.⁵⁰ Although Carville's reading of McElheran's pamphlet is provocative and suggestive, it entirely neglects the scientific racialism that provided McElheran with the material and methods to construct his hybrid and serial texts on racial identity. Robert Young's account, less preoccupied with subtle postcolonial inflections, sets McElheran's racialism in scientific context and reconstructs in detail his dispute with the *Times*.⁵¹ What is missing from both Young and Carville's analysis is any reference to McElheran's political allegiances. Arguably, it was these more than anything else that motivated and molded his ethnological enunciations.

McElheran's place of birth and early education are not known.⁵² What is known is that he was educated in Edinburgh and gained a license from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in August 1845.⁵³ It is likely, then, that it was in Edinburgh that McElheran first encountered the racial theories of the maverick anatomist, Robert Knox.⁵⁴ But wherever the encounter occurred, it is clear that Knox was the primary influence on McElheran's understanding of racial difference. For McElheran, as for Knox, races, once formed by a process of degeneration and divergence from an original type, became permanent. Such degeneration was not induced by the environment but rather by the interplay between material and "vital" causes that produced all animal forms. Although McElheran emphasized the original unity of the human races—a scientific fact that for McElheran confirmed the scriptural fact of an original and perfect human couple—this monogenism did not move him far from Knox's radical racial theory. In emphasizing an anti-progressivist and anti-environmentalist account of racial development and in stressing race as a fixed and fundamental feature of human history, McElheran cleaved closely to the theoretical claims and core categories of Knox's racialism.⁵⁵

The incongruity of McElheran's enthusiasm for Knox's racialism is, on first examination, striking. It is often noted that Knox was virulently anti-Celtic.⁵⁶ But he could also be scurrilously anti-Saxon. Knox, for all his apparent championing of Saxon supremacy, disavowed a progressive and hierarchical understanding of race. Knox's outbursts against Celtic despotism and militarism and his encomiums on the superior qualities of the Saxon were frequently followed by contrasting

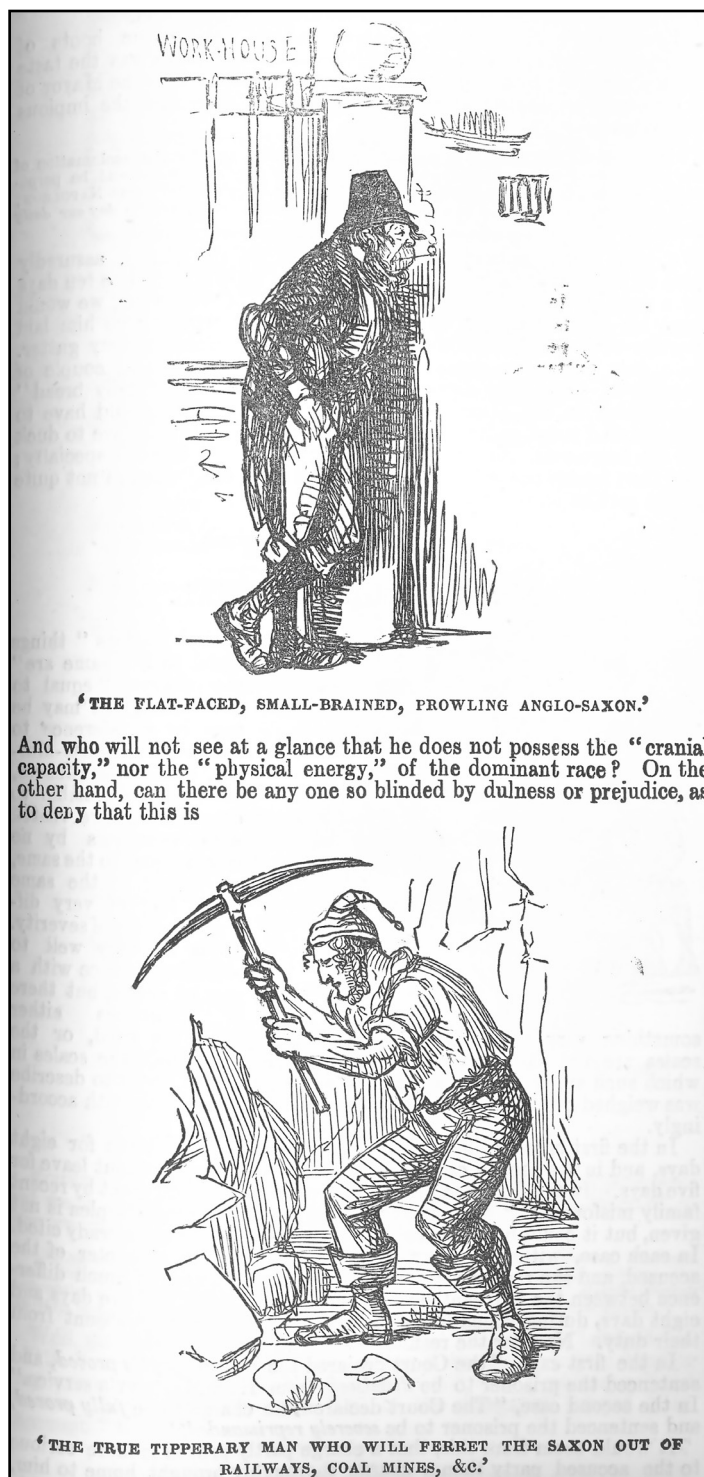


Figure 2. A sketch in *Punch* satirizing McElheran's racial schemata. The "Anglo-Saxon" resembles commonplace caricatures of the Irish. The "Tipperary man" is depicted as a miner and an ethnologist, doubly disrupting McElheran's claim that the most degraded racial type was found among English colliers. Among other things, the sketches rendered McElheran's "reverse ethnology" as itself akin to caricature.

evaluations that destabilized the presumption of hierarchy. One example is Knox's arresting claim that his own racial theory, based as it was on the *Naturphilosophie* of German "Slavonians" such as Oken, Goethe, and Spix, could never have been "imagined" or even understood by a Saxon.⁵⁷ More relevant for McElheran was Knox's highly unstable and paradoxical account of the Celt and the Saxon.

Not surprisingly, McElheran took full advantage of Knox's strategic reversals by quoting at length his teacher's descriptions of a rapacious and brutally selfish Saxon race. McElheran also exploited the political convictions that informed Knox's reflections on racial types. Knox's republicanism and radicalism—along with his mordant and magniloquent style—were readily turned against the British imperial system that McElheran blamed for Ireland's misfortunes. Indeed, Knox's work supplied pithy descriptions of Saxon misrule in Ireland. The island, Knox noted, had long suffered from political enslavement and the "see-saw, diverting buffoonery and deplorable hypocrisy" of English rule.⁵⁸ For Knox, that was fully to be expected. Saxons were, by nature, cold, calculating, and mercenary.⁵⁹ For that reason, it was inevitable that the Saxon, driven by an insatiable appetite for accumulating territory, would drive out the Celts from Ireland. Knox's discourse was, then, rabidly dialectical, even eristic, and it provided a deliciously quotable resource for pursuing opposite political and ethnological programs.⁶⁰

McElheran's career as a political agitator began shortly after he established a surgical practice in Hercules Place, a quarter of Belfast better known for its concentration of Catholic butchers and cattle traders.⁶¹ By his own admission, McElheran's practice was not particularly successful and, in any case, he spent a good deal of time away from Belfast. In 1848, McElheran lent some support to the failed rebellion mounted by the Young Irelanders, but his political involvement and public profile dramatically increased after his letter to the *Times*.⁶² Thereafter, it was Dublin rather than Belfast that became the main center of his politicking and lecturing. As well as speaking at the Dublin Mechanic's Institute, McElheran involved himself in the Irish Tenant League, the Religious Equality Conference, the labor movement, and Robert Cane's Celtic Union. His lecturing took him to Tuam (where he banqueted with the patriot Archbishop John MacHale) and, later, to Liverpool.⁶³ His championing of labor rights and universal franchise brought him into contact with the Labour Parliament in Manchester and in March 1854, along with Karl Marx, he was elected an honorary member of that short-lived "alternative parliament."⁶⁴ Perhaps most significantly, however, in January 1854 McElheran presided over a "national banquet" in Dublin to celebrate the safe arrival to New York of the exiled Young Irishman, John Mitchel, a public act that caused the *Belfast Newsletter* to declare that "the mantel of Mitchel has surely fallen [...] on the shoulders of McElheran [...] the quondam Belfast surgeon apothecary."⁶⁵

Even when adopting the posture of a detached observer of human racial variety, McElheran closely aligned his ethnological descriptions with his political predilections. In a paper published in the *UJA* in 1854, McElheran presented an ethnological sketch of the Claddagh, a small fishing community near Galway. McElheran's choice of field site for his ethnographical investigations was carefully considered. The Claddagh had been frequently described by travel writers on Irish tours and was widely regarded as an ethnological curiosity. Interpretations varied, with some observers describing the villagers of the Claddagh as self-sufficient, industrious, and well ordered, even if primitive and superstitious.⁶⁶ Others painted an altogether darker picture of a backward and recalcitrant population resistant to progress and living in filth and squalor.⁶⁷ McElheran shared the view of the villagers as primitive but regretted the gradual disappearance of their superstitions, finding in them echoes of noble (if not yet Christian) ancient beliefs and practices. Against the dominant view that the Claddagh residents were of Spanish or mixed descent, McElheran insisted that they were of "the most ancient Celtic type." He also was careful to note that the reported indifference to progress was now on the ebb and that the people of the

Claddagh were on the cusp of making a signal contribution to the advance of modern civilization. McElheran opened his paper by reminding his readers that the Claddagh was the “projected site of the American packet station,” thus connecting his observations to long-standing efforts to transform Galway into a major port city for transferring American exports to Europe. The current “primitive inhabitants” of the village may, McElheran surmised, be the forebears of the “merchant princes” of a “great commercial city connecting the old and new worlds.”⁶⁸ Their physical appearance was in contrast to that of the “Saxon slaves,” who were marked out by their “heavy gait, blurred features, and dark eye.”⁶⁹ McElheran’s conclusion was that the Claddagh fishing folk “had within them the elements of a great people” and were of the “same race as are found in Belfast and Glasgow.”⁷⁰

McElheran’s career in Ireland as an ethnologist and Mitchelite nationalist was cut short in May 1854 with his move to New York.⁷¹ It is likely that his outspoken support for Mitchel was, in part at least, behind his move, but he may also have been at risk of conviction, under the Treason-Felony Act (1848), for remarks in a lecture on “loyalty” to the Dublin Mechanics’ Institution shortly after the visit of Queen Victoria to Ireland in September 1853.⁷² Whatever the reasons for his relocation, McElheran continued to use ethnology to further an Irish nationalist cause.

A little over two years after his arrival in New York, McElheran addressed the city’s Academy of Medicine on the subject of the “comparative anatomy of the human crania.”⁷³ The paper later appeared in full in the *New York Journal of Medicine*, and here McElheran’s reliance on the “transcendental doctrines” of Robert Knox came to the fore.⁷⁴ Following Knox, McElheran asserted that human racial varieties were caused by “permanent arrestments of development.” Even so, he gave Knox’s transcendental racialism his own idiosyncratic formulation arguing that the “original unity” of the human type diverged and degraded towards “herbivorous” and “carnivorous” varieties. More decisively, he argued against Knox that the Celtic race exhibited the “highest range of development.” This meant it was possible to observe within Celtic populations “forms analogous to the types of all other races.” For all that, the “lowest Celts retained their superiority over the highest Goths and Negroes” due to “differently formed brains.”⁷⁵ To lend authority to his revised hierarchical ordering, McElheran summarily dismissed the work of the noted ethnologists, Samuel George Morton, Petrus Camper, and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. According to McElheran, the crude measurements of a Morton, Camper, or Blumenbach could not capture the subtle “lines of difference” that marked out different racial varieties. Using his own more discerning eye, McElheran had examined Morton’s skulls collections more than “fifty times,” a laborious exercise contrasting with that of the “Anglo-Saxon theorists who found their own superiority in five or six skulls.”⁷⁶ Through the course of his lecture, McElheran redefined the meaning of the term “Celtic” from one that described a discrete and locatable population to a human type distinguished by brain anatomy and the fine details of cranial morphology. The conclusion of McElheran’s lecture, if not his article, was to persuade his audience that the “true American type is [...] a pure bred Celtic race” as testified by “their language, their physique and impulsive, versatile genius.” In a final flourish, McElheran used his own sketches of Celtic types to demonstrate that the “typical American, such as Washington, Jackson, Taylor, Webster,” resembled them exactly.⁷⁷

As well as presenting his anti-Saxon message to learned audiences, McElheran made the most of more popular media. In a series of articles published in the Irish-Catholic newspaper, the *Boston Pilot*, McElheran launched an all-out assault on the “Anglomania” of the scientific and public press in Britain and North America.⁷⁸ These articles formed the mainstay of his book, *The Condition of Women and Children among the Celtic, Gothic and Other Nations*, published in Boston in 1858 by Patrick Donahoe, the *Pilot*’s proprietor and leading sponsor of Catholic literature in North America. The book’s condemnation of Saxonism was, if anything, more shrill and sensationalist

than McElheran's previous proclamations. The thesis that "nations were and are barbarous and unjust, and cruel to woman in proportion to their distance from the Celtic group" was pursued relentlessly and at the expense of the "Anglo-Saxon" or "Gothic" race, descended as it was from "the outer rind of humanity in Northern Europe."⁷⁹ McElheran made the most of the surrounding disputes over race, slavery, and the American future to drive home his anti-Saxon message. In McElheran's makeshift racial hierarchy, "the Negro surpasses the Saxon in all the attributes that distinguish the man and the brute." Without defending the actions of American slave owners, McElheran suggested that "the negro woman and child under Celtic control in America is superior to the Saxon woman and child under the English poor law guardian." That ranking remained true despite the fact that the "Negro" was "naturally slavish and feeble-minded." McElheran also detected Saxon influence behind the hypocrisy of British abolitionism, motivated as it was by a desire to secure "a monopoly of slave labor in India."⁸⁰ Moreover, Americans, unlike British employers of female mineworkers or child laborers, "did not mock their slaves by telling them they were free."⁸¹ All of this simply confirmed for McElheran that the root cause of Ireland's distress and disadvantage was the brutal history of Saxon misrule and the influence of Saxon-inspired political economy, "the practical expression of the cold-blooded, rationalistic [...] instinct of the Gothic race."⁸² The only solution for Ireland was "separation from beastly, perfidious Albion."⁸³ The only hope for America lay with the "talent and energy" of the virtuous, freedom-loving Celtic race.⁸⁴

Two very different reviews of McElheran's book illustrate its political bearings and unstable meanings. The first appeared in the Dublin-based *Nation*, in November 1858. The review rehearsed the pre-history of McElheran's latest and longest dissection and deconstruction of Saxon supremacy. McElheran, "a quiet professor of medical science in the busy town of Belfast," had applied his scalpel to "this wonderful demi-god," the Saxon, and exposed his real qualities.⁸⁵ The "superstructure of prejudice" erected and defended by the *Times* had fallen to the ground "on the first volley of hard facts."⁸⁶ Six years later, McElheran had produced a book that provided "ready weapons" against gross Saxonism. For the *Nation's* reviewer, every sentence of McElheran's book stood "perfect, round and ready to be taken with scarcely diminished force as a stone to [...] demolish for ever some Anglo-Saxon falsehood or another."⁸⁷ Among the most important effects of McElheran's text was to decenter and demote the Saxon-centric account of world affairs that lay behind England's empire. In the long view provided by McElheran, the idea that London lay at "the centre of the inhabitable earth" and that it was the destiny of the English race to "rule the world" was declared preposterous. It was, instead the "Celtic centre," which in ancient times stretched "from Asia Minor, along the northern shores of the Mediterranean into Erin," that would, in time, guide and bless all nations with "light, and power and law." Everything, announced the reviewer, "in history, in geography and in ethnology tends to the same point."⁸⁸

The second review appeared some months later in the pages of *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, a periodical edited by the leading American Catholic apologist, Orestes Augustus Brownson. McElheran's book—which Brownson judged "not even worth the labor of a serious refutation"—provided a useful foil for defending Brownson's own views on the connections between race, religion, and American politics.⁸⁹ What Brownson found particularly bothersome about McElheran's argument was the assumption that the Celtic race was naturally inclined to be Catholic whereas the propensity of the Saxon race was towards Protestantism and its more heretical offshoots. For Brownson this was, in its practical and political import if not theoretical pretensions, rank polygenism, a doctrine that he deemed utterly incompatible with Christianity and American democracy.⁹⁰ Brownson's primary concern was to persuade his fellow American citizens that Catholicism was neither an enemy of free states nor a friend of despotism. McElheran, he argued, militated against this aim and reduced American Catholics to a "foreign colony" cut

off from the task of building a great nation. In making these judgments, Brownson sharpened a tension that McElheran constantly negotiated throughout his work on the Celtic race. On the one hand McElheran's argument, following Knox, was based on the premise that "no race ever changes its radical character." The Celtic race was the "least fallen," the Saxon the most degenerate. On the other hand, the "divine mission" given to the Celtic race was to "save the rest of mankind" by spreading the Christian message. McElheran, in a bid for consistency, nowhere denied that this was possible but, at the same time, stressed that "no converted nation made slower progress in Christianity than the Anglo-Saxons."⁹¹

Brownson's review marked the end of McElheran's career as the champion of the Celtic race. A few months after McElheran's book was published, notices recording his death in London of heart disease appeared in the *Belfast Newsletter* and the *Freeman's Journal*.⁹² His legacy within British ethnology was slight. The Scottish ethnologist Daniel Wilson briefly referred to his work only to dismiss it as "embittered by the narrowest spirit of national prejudice," a criticism he was equally keen to level at the "Teutonic partisan" John Pinkerton.⁹³ In contrast, ten years after his death, the *Nation* found confirmation for McElheran's thesis that the majority of Britain's population had Celtic origins in the ethnological observations of Thomas Henry Huxley. Yet unlike Huxley, but in keeping with McElheran, the *Nation's* editorialist insisted that the Irish, in being purely Celtic, were "ethnologically different from England." The Irish thus required a different form of government and, under the sway of English rule, remained a "Prometheus in chains," a superior race bound by political slavery.⁹⁴ This provided a neat summary of the aggressively polemical "ethno-nationalism" that McElheran had championed for nearly a decade in Ireland, Britain, and North America.

Intimate ethnologies and global imaginaries

In early September 1852, Hume and McElheran were both in Belfast to witness the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Hume, on the committee of Section E, was formally involved. McElheran did not participate in an official capacity but addressed members of the Association via the pages of the *Northern Whig*. Over the next few years, both men published on Irish ethnology in the pages of the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*. Such proximity in space and in print did nothing to ameliorate the intense oppositions found between Hume's environmentalist racialism and McElheran's "transcendental" account of racial difference. Yet for all those evident differences, it is worth noting that Hume and McElheran shared certain deep-seated sensibilities and intellectual habits of thought.

In the first place, the ethnologies of both Hume and McElheran were intimately related to their own self-perceptions. In 1845, Hume had laboriously put together an "illustrated pedigree" of his own family that traced their ancestry back to a Saxon King and to nobility resident in the Scottish border region.⁹⁵ According to an influential theory promoted by a number of British ethnologists, being a descendent of the lowland Scots placed Hume within a pure Saxon line.⁹⁶ Hume was aware of this, noting in a later article that "rich Saxons" had fled north into the Scottish border region during the reign of William the Conqueror and thoroughly Saxonized the district.⁹⁷

Notably, among the groups that McElheran placed on the "outer rind" of humanity was the "lousy" Saxon race of the Scottish lowlands, "a very filthy people" who shared none of the virtues of the Celtic Highlander.⁹⁸ Not surprisingly, then, McElheran—self-described as a "rough northerner"—worked to establish his own distinctly Celtic pedigree. Though he did not, as far as we know, conduct the kind of painstaking genealogical research carried out by Hume, he did confirm that his surname connected him directly to "his Irish speaking friends in the Glens of Antrim." His "honourable patronymic," pronounced, he suggested, "M'Gil Kerin" by native Irish

speakers, placed his ancestry close to the ruins of St. Kerin's chapel in north Antrim.⁹⁹ This rooted him to a Celtic and Catholic past and linked him with a living community widely acknowledged to be composed of "native Irish."¹⁰⁰

In the second place, Hume and McElheran both scaled up their ethnological theories to produce a global racial geography and, in so doing, provided a basis for a form of ethnic colonialism. McElheran, for example, pictured the populated earth as,

composed of realms, one Mediterranean, nursing the original [Celtic] tree, bearing the loveliest flowers, and producing the finest fruits; each of the other realms bears a slip of the old tree, transplanted and grown into a tree, with its branches, and the great tree of each realm is weaker and coarser the farther it has been transplanted; but, being transplanted, its new growth or type is permanent. But the old tree still grows on, and increases, and casts its branches over the earth, killing out the weaker trees—in other words, the original old race is encroaching upon all other races.¹⁰¹

In sketching this appropriately biological, but also biblical image, McElheran licensed a version of the "anti-colonial colonialism" of Robert Knox with the Celt settling in other parts of the world not to annex them for Ireland, but to create independent nations animated by the "spark" of Celtic genius.¹⁰² Certainly, there was little space in McElheran's globalized racial geography for ethnic groups such as the "red men of America," except as "savages" akin to the degraded Saxon and unlikely to survive the inexorable growth of a transnational "Celtica."¹⁰³

Hume, too, projected his racialist geography of Ireland onto global spaces. In his descriptions of South America he evoked a global region that, at a continental scale, paralleled Ireland in being over-shadowed by a "corrupt Christian faith" (Roman Catholicism) and populated, in the main, by benighted "natives." His reports of his trip to South America suggest that he saw the hope of the continent resting in the hands of well-constituted missionaries who could, like the Saxons in Ireland, resist the "relaxing effects of the climate" and avoid the vices of idleness and apathy that beset the "natives."¹⁰⁴ Hume also made clear that these primitive peoples of South America were in a much earlier stage of human development. In keeping with this traditional stadial understanding of human history and geography, Hume suggested that innate racial differences had been exaggerated. The whole world was, after all, "kin."¹⁰⁵ Even so, tellingly imagining the globe as a "single country," Hume found within its borders human inhabitants like the "Digger Indians" of California who lived in "artificial structures scarcely more pretentious than that constructed by the gorilla." Such groups were on "the lowest round in the ladder which conducts to platform of civilization."¹⁰⁶ It was this "softer" racialism that underwrote Hume's global vision of strategically located "centres of action" that he took to be essential for advancing religious and economic enlightenment.

However the similarities and differences between Hume and McElheran are parsed, it is clear that neither is easily placed within scholarly debates about the racialization of the Irish. It might be suggested, for example, that McElheran's racialist tracts were a classic form of mimicry, aping and reversing the more virulent representations of the Irish race found in British ethnological and popular discourse and thus confirming the prevalence and influence of those damaging depictions. Whether or not that is a plausible way to read McElheran's racialist tracts, it hardly tells the whole story. McElheran found in Knox's "transcendental" racialism habits of thought and political sentiments useful for constructing ethnological descriptions that cannot be easily reduced to an act of intellectual mimicry. McElheran's transcendental Celticism lent support to an "ethnic" nationalism and a "diasporic imperialism" that was warmly received in

certain Irish nationalist circles. This suggests that more attention needs to be given to the ways in which Knox-style racist thought was utilized in support of a form of Irish (trans)nationalism that has sometimes been styled “civic” rather than “ethnic.”

Hume, too, disrupts certain common assumptions. His monogenism and environmentalism—two connected intellectual convictions that are frequently aligned with a critique of racist thinking—were combined with an understanding of race that, in its political implications, differed little from more “innatist” and polygenist accounts of racial difference. That he used this vigorous form of racism for political purposes sits uncomfortably with suggestions that race was a category of little importance in Irish Protestant and unionist discourse. Hume’s conservative unionism and, more particularly, his unyielding support for the Established Church did not make him atypical even if it set him apart from the more liberal strands of unionism that found significant support among Ulster Presbyterians. Hume’s case suggests that more needs to be done to track the importance of race as an explanatory or descriptive category within different strands of unionist thought in mid-Victorian Ireland.

Taken together, the ethnological interventions of Hume and McElheran form a rather unpalatable episode in the “racialization of the Irish” during the nineteenth century. Neither provides ready material for scoring historiographical points. But both point to the “cross-party” allure of racial categorization in mid-Victorian Ireland, and both highlight the influence of contingent geographical circumstances in shaping the lineaments and unedifying legacies of racist discourse.

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