

## Cultural Connections in North-West Britain and Ireland

IN HIS "WEST EUROPEAN CONNECTIONS AND CULTURAL RELATIONS", Sigurd Erixon drew attention to a number of criteria that define a folk cultural unity in the Atlantic fringes of the European continent, and he showed that this unity could be traced from western Scandinavia in the north, southwards at least to Portugal. At the same time he indicated important respects in which the different parts of this discontinuous Atlantic fringe region differ from each other, reflecting either climatic or other physical variations, or differences brought about by geographical location relative to the areas of origin and dispersal of folk cultural phenomena <sup>1</sup>.

There has been much subsequent research along the lines indicated by Erixon's paper, particularly in Ireland, and more recently in Scotland. This is showing that there was a certain cultural unity in north-west Britain and the northern and western parts of Ireland, albeit on a more limited scale than Erixon suggested for western Europe generally. This unity may even have been evident in prehistoric times, since the builders of the megalithic tombs now known as *court cairns* (formerly Clyde-Carling-ford tombs) were the first agriculturalists in much of this area, except for the extreme north of Scotland. These early peoples established themselves in environments then most suited to their technology, but in the succeeding millenia these areas increasingly became a sort of cultural backwater, partly due to social and technical changes and partly due to climatic changes. Nevertheless, it has been tentatively suggested that this first settlement of agriculturalists established a population stratum that in later times was to act as a conservative element in the make-up of successive folk cultures <sup>2</sup>. The presence of this conservative element may have been an important factor in the emergence of folk cultural patterns that have been delineated by recent research.

It is now clear that within Ireland, for example, some features of recent folk life in the north display greater similarities to circumstances in the north of England and in western Scotland, than to the southern Irish province of Munster. Study of both material and non-material aspects of folk culture has indicated this at different stages in history. Thus there are many correspondences between the romantic tales of Ulster and similar tales found in the Outer Hebrides <sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, linguistic parallels have been drawn between the dialects of Gaelic spoken in these areas within recent centuries, and a dialect of Gaelic survived in the west Lowlands of Scotland into the middle of the 18th century. There are also many connections in the dialects of English spoken on the opposite sides of the North Channel and around the northern end of the Irish Sea <sup>4</sup>. Thus there need be little cause for surprise at discovering similarities in material culture in these areas when it is remembered that considerable numbers of west Lowland Scots people settled in the north of Ireland in the 17th century, and that others of them were settled first in the Argyllshire peninsula of Kintyre, in the south-

1. S. Erixon, West European Connections and Cultural Relations. *Folkliv* (Stockholm), 2 (1938), pp. 137-172.

2. A. Gailey, The Ulster Tradition. *Folk Life* (Cardiff), 2 (1964), pp. 37-41.

3. See, for example, G. Murphy, The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland. In: James Carney (ed.), *Early Irish Literature*. London, 1966.

4. The linguistic evolution of both languages in Ulster, and their connections with north-west Britain, have been explored in G. B. Adams, The emergence of Ulster as a distinct dialect area. *Ulster Folklife* (Belfast), 4 (1958), pp. 61-73.

west Highlands of Scotland, whence they or their descendants were later removed to north-east Ulster. And it was from this same Highland Scottish county of Argyll that so many of the *gallowglasses* (mercenary soldiers) came to serve in Irish campaigns in the 15th and 16th centuries, some of them ultimately to settle in Ireland permanently<sup>5</sup>. So, if in recent research in Ulster there may seem to have been a tendency to regard the 17th-century Plantation of Ulster as a social and cultural "watershed" of significant proportions, the earlier connections amongst the peoples of this north-western region in Ireland and Britain must not be overlooked. It is possible that the 17th-century planters were forced, to some degree, to accommodate themselves to an existing cultural-geographical pattern, and that their advent to Ireland from culturally related areas in north-west Britain meant that the Plantation of Ulster as a whole was not so revolutionary as some historians have asserted, remembering that there were many settlers coming to Ulster also from culturally unrelated districts in England.

AN APPRECIABLE DIFFICULTY IN ASSESSING the historical depth of cultural relationships throughout this region lies in the recent nature of the available evidence for folk culture. What is known, and perhaps all that is knowable, refers back to the early 18th century, but seldom earlier. Much is even more recent, particularly in the field of material culture. Nowhere is this clearer than in the evidence for peasant housing<sup>6</sup>. Many similarities have been noticed in the details of house construction and lay-out between western and northern Ireland, and western Scotland. An example is the use of a close network of ropes to keep the thatch material in place, a technique predominant in many coastal localities and known also in the Isle of Man and in some parts of the eastern coastlands of Ulster in the past<sup>7</sup>.

Pegged thatch has been known in recent times in only restricted areas in the west and the extreme north of Ireland, and also in Argyllshire. The technique is a hybrid between the roped thatch of the Atlantic coastlands and the Irish variant of a common European technique of pinning the thatch material in place with slender wooden rods, a method well known, for instance, in the reed thatching of parts of lowland Britain, notably Norfolk. The typological position of pegged thatch is matched by its geographical location, always in or close to the contact zones between the areas typified by the roped and the pinned techniques<sup>8</sup>. But because the only available evidence for any thatching technique in Ireland is recent, it is impossible to decide if typological hybrids such as pegged thatch are of appreciable antiquity. Nevertheless, they are indexes of cultural change and experimentation insofar as they represent

5. See, for example, G. A. Hayes-McCoy, *Scots Mercenary Forces in Ireland (1565-1603)*. Dublin, 1937.

6. A. Gailey, The Peasant Houses of the South-West Highlands of Scotland. *Gwerin* (Cardiff), 3 (1962), pp. 227-242.

7. *Ibid.*, 231; C. Sinclair, *The Thatched Houses of the Old Highlands*. Edinburgh, 1953. pp. 27, 37, 43; Caoimhín O' Danachair, Some Distribution Patterns in Irish Folk Life. *Béaloides* (Dublin), 25 (1957), pp. 111-113.

8. A. Gailey, *op. cit.*, *Gwerin*, 3 (1962), 231; Ronald H. Buchanan, Thatch and Thatching in North-East Ireland. *Gwerin*, 1 (1957), p. 134.

attempts by the inhabitants of one cultural region to come to terms with cultural elements from another region.

McCourt has recently drawn a similar conclusion from a study of hybrid house-types in mid-Ulster <sup>9</sup>. In these houses two features are combined, the sleeping recess, or niche, typical of the gable-hearth Irish house-type of the north-west of the island <sup>10</sup>, and the screen between hearth and door in the central-hearth house-type found in the centre, south and east of the country, and also in mid-Ulster <sup>11</sup>. Usually these two features, and the house-types that they typify, characterise distinctive cultural regions, and the hybrid types that contain both features occur where they might be expected, in the zone of contact between the two basic housetype regions. The typological details of the hybrid houses suggest that the north-western region accepted only certain features of the cultural pattern of the east and south of the country. It seems that the north-western region was able to select those elements that were capable of assimilation into an already existing cultural pattern, implying a basic human attitude of conservatism that has already been mentioned.

If the cultural borderland between these two fundamental folk cultural regions in Irish folk life, and the characteristics of cultural change within it, are being defined mainly from studies of peasant housing, similar regional polarity has been apparent from the study of many aspects of folk culture, both material and non-material in character <sup>12</sup>. This polarity has been interpreted in terms of conservatism in the north-west, and innovativeness in the south and east. However, because the north-western area belongs to a broader Atlantic fringe area in western Britain and Ireland, it may be that the conclusions based on the northern Irish evidence will be applicable elsewhere, for example in the transition from Lowland to Highland Scottish folk culture. The fundamental characteristics of the Atlantic fringe areas seem to be conservatism and an ability to assimilate new ideas, without revolutionising an existing cultural pattern. The opposite characteristics, of innovativeness and cultural replacement, seem to have been prevalent in the eastern parts of Ireland, and possibly of Scotland also. This total situation is essentially a dynamic one, and if ideas of folk cultural regional identity are to be meaningful, it is possible that they must be expressed in such dynamic terms. Thus, even though a particular element is known to have been restricted to a given area of country at one point in time, this distribution need not necessarily define a cultural region. Deeper examination may show how the cultural distribution in question has developed, and how it may even continue to do so today. To do this it may be necessary to examine a complex of material and non-material traits — an example where this has been attempted is in the study of types of rope-twister and the dialect names for them in the north of Ireland <sup>13</sup>.

9. D. McCourt, Hausformen in einem kulturellen Kontaktgebiet Nordirlands, *Deutsches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde*, 14 (1968), pp. 247-260.

10. D. McCourt, The Outshot House-Type and its Distribution in County Londonderry. *Ulster Folklife*, 2 (1956), Plate VII; C. O'Danachair, The Bed Out-Shot in Ireland. *Folkliv*, 29-30 (1955-56), pp. 26-31.

11. C. O'Danachair, Three House Types, *Ulster Folklife*, 2 (1956), pp. 22-26.

12. A. Gailey, op. cit., *Folk Life*, 2 (1964), pp. 28-37.

13. A. Gailey, Ropes and Rope-Twisters, *Ulster Folklife*, 8 (1962), pp. 72-82.

IF CONSERVATIVE ATTITUDES have prevailed on the Atlantic coastlands, it follows that archaic features of folk culture have tended to accumulate there, although it must be noted that over the past four or five decades, continuous official financial aid to these areas in Ireland and Scotland has tended to obliterate some manifestations of this survival, particularly on the material side. Erixon referred to sleeping niches typifying much of the west European region<sup>14</sup>, but in Britain and Ireland they are confined mainly to the Atlantic coastlands. Similarly confined are crudely made cruck-trusses used in roofing. Such trusses have only recently been confirmed in Ireland where in the north-western counties of Donegal, Londonderry, Tyrone and Fermanagh they are basically similar to one another<sup>15</sup>, and to those found in the west Highlands of Scotland<sup>16</sup>. The cruck blades are generally of composite form, consisting each of a principal roof member scarfed and pegged into an upright wall-post, although some examples of markedly elbowed, continuous cruck blades are known in both areas. Significantly, in Ulster, the principal exceptions, of long, straight, or only slightly elbowed form, are from an English Plantation context, and their inspiration may originally have derived from a north midland English source<sup>17</sup>. They are quite distinct typologically from the composite blades that McCourt, in a recent paper, considered as characteristic of north-west Britain and Ireland<sup>18</sup>.

Erixon mentioned a complex of traits that characterised our north-western region; this included the baking of thin oaten bread on flat iron plates, suspended or supported over an open hearth. The baking oven was unknown in this complex<sup>19</sup>. Such unleavened oaten bread is still a recognised bread type in most of northern Britain and in the northern parts of Ireland. In addition, from house studies it is quite clear that in Ulster the oven is an alien element, known only in a very small number of houses, all of which were built by English planters in the 17th or 18th centuries.

There was similarity in rural economic organisation over much of Ireland and Scotland, particularly between the 17th and 19th centuries. In both countries an infield/outfield system with common grazings prevailed<sup>20</sup>. Cultivation methods within this economy, too, showed similarities between the two countries, although there is better evidence for the use of the plough in Scotland than in Ireland<sup>21</sup>.

14. Erixon, *op. cit.*, *Folkliv*, 2 (1938), p. 170.

15. D. McCourt, Some Cruck-framed Buildings in Donegal and Derry. *Ulster Folklife*, 11 (1965), pp. 39-50; E. Estyn Evans, Some Cruck Roof-trusses in Ulster. *Ulster Folklife*, 12 (1966), pp. 35-40.

16. D. McCourt, Two Cruck-framed Buildings in Wester Ross, Scotland. *Ulster Folklife*, 13 (1967), pp. 75-78; J. Walton, Cruck-Framed Buildings in Scotland. *Gwerin*, 1 (1957) pp. 109-122; J. Dunbar, Some Cruck-Framed Buildings in the Aberfeldy District of Perthshire. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Edinburgh), 90 (1959), pp. 81-92.

17. A. Gailey, Two Cruck Truss Houses near Lurgan. *Ulster Folklife*, 8 (1962), pp. 57-64.

18. D. McCourt, The Cruck Truss in Ireland and its West European Connections. *Folkliv*, 28-29 (1964-65), pp. 64-75.

19. S. Erixon, *op. cit.*, *Folkliv*, 2 (1938), pp. 152-155.

20. I. F. Grant, The Highland Openfield System, *The Geographical Teacher*, (London), 13 (1926), p. 481; J. E. Handley, *Scottish Farming in the Eighteenth Century*. London, 1953; D. McCourt Infield and Outfield in Ireland. *Economic History Review* (London), 2nd series, 7 (1954-55), pp. 369-376.

21. A. Fenton, Early and Traditional Cultivating Implements in Scotland. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 96 (1962-63), pp. 264-317.

However, in the Atlantic fringe areas that are of primary concern here, spade cultivation often, if not always, was the norm, and the one-shouldered varieties of spade in use in Highland Scotland and in western Ireland (the *cas dhireach* and the *loy* or *feac* respectively) were essentially the same<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, single-shouldered spades were in use in the early 19th century in a district as close to industrialised, urbanised Belfast as east county Antrim<sup>23</sup>. Some lesser-known correspondences existed in other kinds of spade in our region also, for example, the use of a pointed-mouthed, two-shouldered spade with a fairly short shaft in east county Down and in Galloway in south-west Scotland. Also in the south-west of Scotland and in north-east Ireland, the lateral wing of the blade of the peat-cutting spade sweeps back towards the handle from the mouth of the blade; but farther south in Ireland the long axis of the lateral wing is set at right angles to the side of the blade, or it may even be pointed forward so that the extremity of the wing is set in advance of the mouth or cutting edge of the blade.

One criterion that well exemplifies the ease of movement of ideas and objects within northern and western Britain and Ireland is the two-wheeled Scotch cart. This spread from Scotland into Ireland about 1800, replacing the older block-wheeled cars that were still common in many districts late in the 19th century, especially in the northern and eastern districts of the country. The stimulus for its introduction existed in the rapidly growing linen industry of Ulster at that period, and specialised variants of the Scotch cart came into existence for carting linen to and from the bleach greens<sup>24</sup>. Another element that arrived in the extreme east of county Down, and possibly elsewhere in north-east Ireland, from the east of Scotland was the Scotch scythe, an implement having a Y-shaped shaft, the extremities of the top of the Y forming the handles. Indeed, the scythe itself was a late-comer even in parts of eastern Ireland, and reaping by the sickle or hook survived in many western areas into the present century.

IN SPITE OF THESE MANY SIMILARITIES in folk culture in our area it should be noted that some marked differences existed also. A widespread article of furniture in peasant kitchens all over Ireland is the settle-bed — it serves as seat by day, and as a bed by night. But the settle-bed appears not to have been known in Highland Scotland<sup>25</sup>. In the field of oral culture, it has recently been noticed that even in areas in the north of Ireland like north county Donegal and south county Antrim, where there was extensive settlement by people of Scottish origin, the prevailing forms of folk drama have been based on English rather than on Scottish prototypes<sup>26</sup>. However, since it

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 302-312; Å. Campbell, Keltisk och Nordisk Kultur i möte på Hebriderna. *Folkliv*, 7-8 (1943-44), pp. 231-235; C. O'Danachair, The Spade in Ireland. *Béaloidéas*, 31 (1963), pp. 98-114.

23. Ordnance Survey Memoirs (manuscript), County Antrim, Box 1, Ardclinis Parish.

24. G. B. Thompson, *Primitive Land Transport of Ulster*. Belfast Museum and Art Gallery Publication No. 159, p. 28.

25. Information for Scotland from Alexander Fenton, Edinburgh. The settle-bed is not mentioned in: I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways*. London, 1961. See also A. Gailey, Kitchen furniture. *Ulster Folklife*, 12 (1964), pp. 28-29.

26. A. Gailey, The Rhyimers of South-East Antrim, *Ulster Folklife*, 13 (1967), pp. 18-28.

cannot be shown that the known Scottish varieties of folk play were in existence at the time of the 17th-century Plantations in Ulster, they may be of relatively late origin, a supposition supported also by the absence of the Scottish forms from the New World, in areas where there were Scots settlers.

The problem of defining the folk cultural identity of the Atlantic fringes of Britain and Ireland is too difficult to be solved merely from a consideration of individual cultural elements, or of simple complexes of them. The degree of complexity necessary before this identity becomes apparent remains unknown. But it is now clear that this north-western region in Britain and Ireland is emerging as a cultural province in its own right, while at the same time partaking of the broader cultural unity of western Europe. As Erixon pointed out, some of the features discussed briefly here have connections with other parts of western Europe. But on the other hand there are elements in the folk cultures of west Britain and Ireland that are unique to those areas. This is possibly more noticeable in some aspects of oral culture, and also in the observance of the Celtic quarterday festivals<sup>27</sup>, although as the recent important study of the festival of Lughnasa shows, even these had connections with countries like France<sup>28</sup>. The important problem that remains unresolved, however, is that of the regional scale on which cultural unity is to be defined. As suggested earlier, it is perhaps in culturally conditioned human psychological attitudes and motives, rather than in the elements of material or non-material culture, that such unity is to be sought.

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27. C. O'Danachair, *The Quarter Days in Irish Tradition*, *Arv* (Uppsala), 15 (1959), pp. 47-55.

28. M. MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*. Oxford, 1962. pp. 385-391.