

Celticism, Internationalism and Scottish Identity

Three Key Images in Focus

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The Scottish Celtic Revival emerged from long-standing debates around language and the concept of a Celtic race, a notion fostered above all by the poet and critic Matthew Arnold.¹ It took the form of a pan-Celtic, rather than a purely Scottish revival, whereby Scotland participated in a shared national mythology that spilled into and overlapped with Irish, Welsh, Manx, Breton and Cornish legend. Some historians portrayed the Celts – the original Scottish settlers – as pagan and feckless; others regarded them as creative and honorable, an antidote to the Industrial Revolution. ‘In a prosaic and utilitarian age,’ wrote one commentator, ‘the idealism of the Celt is an ennobling and uplifting influence both on literature and life.’²

The revival was championed in Edinburgh by the biologist, sociologist and utopian visionary Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), who, in 1895, produced the first edition of his avant-garde journal *The Evergreen: a Northern Seasonal*, edited by William Sharp (1855–1905) and published in four ‘seasonal’ volumes, in 1895–86.³ The journal included translations of Breton and Irish legends and the poetry and writings of Fiona Macleod, Sharp’s Celtic alter ego. The cover was designed by Charles Hodge Mackie (1862–1920) and it was emblazoned with a Celtic Tree of Life. Among the many contributors were Sharp himself and the artist John Duncan (1866–1945), who produced some of the key images of the Scottish Celtic Revival.

However, it was in Galloway, a Celtic region in south-west Scotland, that the first visual expression of the Scottish revival was produced by the painters Edward Atkinson Hornel (1864–1933) and George Henry (1858–1943). Their mysterious joint project, *The Druids: Bringing in the Mistletoe*, of 1890 (Fig. 1, Glasgow

- 1 On Arnold see, for example, Murray Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 64–69
- 2 Anon, ‘Pan-Celtic Congress’, *The Advertiser*, 9 November 1907, 8 (reporting on the Edinburgh Pan-Celtic Congress).
- 3 On *The Evergreen*, see Frances Fowle and Belinda Thomson (eds.), *Patrick Geddes: The French Connection* (Oxford: White Cockade Press, 2004).



Fig. 1. Edward Atkinson Hornel and George Henry, *The Druids: Bringing in the Mistletoe*, 1890, oil on canvas, 152.4cm x 152.4cm. Glasgow Museums Resource Centre
Photo: ©CSG CIC Glasgow Museums and Libraries Collections

Museums), astonished critics when it was displayed in London and Munich in 1890. The German art critic Fritz von Ostini commented on the Glasgow artists' 'real, glowing passion for colour' and their 'great intensity of feeling'.⁴ The painting, surrounded by a spectacular gold frame of interlaced snakes, depicts a procession of Druids in colourful ceremonial robes descending a hill in winter. Some are dark-haired and dark-skinned, representing the powerful Picts, whose Iberian/Scythian origins distinguished them from other Celtic tribes.⁵ Others are red-haired and fair skinned, representing the Kingdom of Dalriada, colonised in the third and fourth centuries by the Scots, a warlike Celtic race with red hair and green eyes. A third 'type' in the painting possibly represents the Britons (or Bretons) of Strathclyde, another Celtic race, who controlled the area from the River Clyde to the Solway Firth (including Galloway), and beyond into northern England. They were stocky, fair-skinned and dark-haired, rather like Hornel himself.

As this essay will argue, Hornel and Henry's painting not only reflects key debates around the origins and identity of the Celts, it represents the plurality and complexity of Celtic identity and the sheer eclecticism of the revival in Scotland. Drawing on contemporary journals and antiquarian publications, as well as John Duncan's Notebooks in the National Library of Scotland, the painting will be analysed in conjunction with two major paintings by Duncan, *Anima Celtica* (National Trust for Scotland), from 1895, and *St Bride* (National Galleries of Scotland), from 1913. Together, these three key images illustrate the different ways in which Scottish identity at this period was expressed: not only through its Celtic past, but also through an awareness of the latest developments in European art and culture, including Symbolism and more esoteric concerns such as Theosophy. As we shall see, Scottish artists in the late 19th century were inspired by avant-garde movements such as Art Nouveau, as much as by archaeological finds and antiquarianism. However, they were also seeking specifically Scottish sources for their *fin-de-siècle* paintings – in the knots and interlace of Celtic metalwork, or the mysterious signs found on Pictish stones. They were considerably aided by the proliferation of antiquarian literature, including new translations and reinterpretations of Celtic myths, and publications containing reproductions of recent 'finds', such as the *Horae Ferales* (1863),

4 'A surprising sense of splendour and power of colour, of a real, glowing passion for colour is peculiar to them ...', in 'Scottish Pictures: What the Germans Think of Them, No. 1', *The Weekly News*, 20 September 1890 (translation of an article by Fritz von Ostini in *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*), Bill Smith, *Hornel: The Life and Work of Edward Atkinson Hornel* (Edinburgh: Atelier Books, 1997), 62.

'Immeasurable is what can be learned from them, from their boldness in colour, their great intensity of feeling ...' in 'Scottish Pictures: What the Germans Think of Them, No. 2', *The Weekly News*, 27 September 1890 (translation of an article by Fritz von Ostini in *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*), Smith 1997, 62.

5 Part of the Celtic migrations that reached the British Isles during the first millennium BCE, the Picts were said to be Scythian in origin. The Scythians were ancient Iranian nomads, also Ukranian. They are also said to have settled for a period in Northern Spain.

as well as pattern books, such as Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856).⁶

Hornel, Henry and the Galloway landscape

The Druids: Bringing in the Mistletoe was similarly eclectic in its approach and represented an entirely new direction for Henry and Hornel. Their earlier paintings were typical of the avant-garde group known as the 'Glasgow Boys' who, inspired by French Realism and the work of Salon Naturalists such as Jules Bastien-Lepage, were dedicated to painting rural subjects out of doors.⁷ Towards the end of the 1880s, however, their work began to move in the direction of decorative Symbolism, beginning with Henry's masterpiece, *A Galloway Landscape*, of 1889 (Glasgow Museums). With its flattened perspective and synthesis of forms – including a stream inspired by the Japanese arabesque – this canvas has been compared to Paul Gauguin's Breton landscapes from the same period. Although Henry's approach was less radical and groundbreaking than that of his French contemporary, he shared an interest in capturing the essence of an area steeped in legend and superstition.

It was Hornel who almost certainly ignited Henry's interest in the landscape of Galloway. In the medieval period the area was inhabited by a population of mixed Scandinavian and Gaelic ethnicity, hence the name Galloway or '*Gall Gaidhell*', meaning, literally 'Foreigner-Gael'. Based in Kirkcudbright, Hornel was well versed in Celtic mythology and was fascinated by the recent discoveries of prehistoric marks hewn into a group of rocks in the surrounding landscape.⁸ He immersed himself in local history and folklore, devouring, among other publications, John Nicholson's *Historical and Traditional Tales ... connected with the South of Scotland* (1843). This included the gruesome cannibalistic tale of Sawney Bean and a poem entitled *The Brownie of Blednoch*, by William Nicholson.⁹ The poem tells the story of a fairy called Aiken Drum who, like all traditional Scottish brownies, lives by water and guards the sheep, but takes offence easily and has a hideous, frightening appearance. In the same year that Henry produced *A Galloway Landscape*, Hornel painted the *Brownie of Blednoch* (Glasgow Museums), bringing to life the brownie in Nicholson's poem. Lit by a silvery moon, the malevolent creature crouches on a hillside beside a babbling brook, very similar to

6 R.G. Latham and A.W. Franks, *Horae Ferales; or Studies in the Archaeology of the Northern Nations* (London, 1863).

7 On this group of artists, see Roger Billcliffe, *The Glasgow Boys* (London: Francis Lincoln, 1985; revised edition 2008), and Roger Billcliffe et al, *Pioneering Painters: The Glasgow Boys* (Glasgow: Glasgow Museums, 2010).

8 Smith 1997, 59. On the discovery, see Fred R. Coles 'A Record of the Cup and Ring Markings in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 29, 1894–95, 67–91.

9 J. Nicholson, *Historical and Traditional Tales in prose and verse, connected with the south of Scotland* (Kirkcudbright, 1943), 72–84. The book is in the library at Broughton House, Kirkcudbright.

the stream in Henry's painting. Like the fairy in the poem, he has glaring eyes, 'matted head (...) a lang blue beard' and 'knotted knees'.¹⁰ The flowing arabesques of the rushing water and the brownie's beard suggest the rhythmic forms of Celtic art, while the concentric rings of the moon are inspired by the Galloway cup-and-ring marks.

The Druids: Bringing in the Mistletoe

The archaeologist J. Romilly Allen would have approved of Hornel's ancient indigenous sources. Writing on 'Early Scandinavian Wood Carvings' in the *Studio* in 1897, he recommended that:

*in seeking for models (...) it is far better to seek inspiration from the works of art produced either by our own ancestors, or by those people in Europe who are nearest akin to ourselves (...) than to endeavor to make wholly alien styles, like those of India or Japan, take root in a soil quite unsuited to their favourable growth.*¹¹

The Celtic Revival was, at least in part, an attempt to regain contact with Scotland's national cultural roots, but for Henry and Hornel this did not mean (as Allen recommended) to the exclusion of other more exotic sources. Both Henry and Hornel were inspired, not only by the ancient markings recently discovered in the Galloway landscape, but also by Japanese prints by Hokusai and others which, from 1889 onwards, they were able to see at the gallery of their friend and supporter, the art dealer Alexander Reid.¹² Indeed, their joint project, *The Druids: Bringing in the Mistletoe*, presented a fusion of Celtic ornament, Japanese design and other continental sources.

The Druids was one of several works by the Glasgow Boys exhibited in 1890 at the Grosvenor Gallery in London, where it caused a sensation. The art critic R.A.M. Stevenson described the druidical figures as 'grim, tawdry, and savage (...) glowing with crude colour'.¹³ The artists constructed a myth around the painting: the solemn procession of Celtic priests emerging from a grove of oaks was said to have been inspired by the vision of a local shaman.¹⁴ In reality, however, the source of the myth is to be found in the writings of Pliny, who described the gathering of the mistletoe in his *Natural History*:

- 10 Nicholson, *Historical and Traditional Tales in prose and verse*, 81.
- 11 J. Romilly Allen, 'Early Scandinavian Wood Carvings', *The Studio*, February 1897, 11.
- 12 On Reid, Hornel and Henry, see Frances Fowle, *Van Gogh's Twin: The Scottish Art Dealer Alexander Reid* (Edinburgh, 2010).
- 13 *The Saturday Review*, 10 May 1890, 565, cited in Smith 1997, 60.
- 14 A.S. Hartrick, *A Painter's Pilgrimage through Fifty Years*, (Cambridge: the University Press, 1939), 61.

The Druids – for that is the name they give to their magicians – held nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and the tree that bears it, supposing always that tree to be the common oak (quercus robur). Of itself the oak is selected by them to form whole groves, and they perform none of their religious rites without employing branches of it; so much so, that it is very probable that the priests themselves may have received their name from the Greek name for that tree [drus]. In fact, it is the notion with them that everything that grows on it has been sent immediately from heaven, and that the mistletoe upon it is a proof that the tree has been selected by God himself as an object of his especial favour.

The mistletoe, however, is but rarely found upon the oak; and when found, is gathered with rites replete with religious awe. This is done more particularly on the fifth day of the moon, the day which is the beginning of their months and years, as also of their ages, which, with them, are but thirty years. This day they select because the moon, though not yet in the middle of her course, has already considerable power and influence; and they call her by a name which signifies, in their language, the all-healing. Having made all due preparation for the sacrifice and a banquet beneath the trees, they bring thither two white bulls, the horns of which are bound then for the first time. Clad in a white robe the priest ascends the tree, and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, which is received by others in a white cloak. They then immolate the victims, offering up their prayers that God will render this gift (...) to those to whom he has so granted it. It is the belief with them that the mistletoe, taken in drink, will impart fecundity to all animals that are barren, and that it is an antidote for all poisons.¹⁵

Sir James Frazer included Pliny's account of the gathering of the mistletoe in *The Golden Bough*, his groundbreaking comparative anthropological study, published in 1890, the same year that Henry and Hornel completed *The Druids*. He surmised that the reason why the oak tree was venerated was the presence of the mistletoe in the deciduous oak during the winter months: 'In winter,' he wrote, 'the sight of its fresh foliage among the bare

15 Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, XVI, 95.

branches must have been hailed by the worshippers of the tree as a sign that the divine life that had ceased to animate the branches, yet survived in the mistletoe.¹⁶ The mistletoe was poisonous and yet had healing powers; it was a symbol of life, as well as a being a harbinger of death. In Norse mythology it caused the death of Balder and in classical legend it allowed Aeneas access to the Underworld. Light and darkness, death and resurrection are recurring themes in Celtic mythology and are also the underlying themes of this painting.

Indeed, the painting should be considered in the context of the artists' only other joint project, *The Star in the East* (Glasgow Museums), which shows the angel announcing the birth of Christ to the shepherds. Exhibited in 1891, this painting, with its profoundly Christian message, was designed as a pendant, as well as a foil, to the pagan ritual of *The Druids*. Despite the obvious differences between the two pictures, there are parallel themes. Both depict events that took place around the same time of year; both depict a group of people – the shepherds and Druids – who lived their lives according to the rhythms of nature, guided by the moon and the stars. The ceremonial gathering of the mistletoe took place at the Winter Solstice, which marks the shortest and darkest day of the year, around 22 December, when nature is at its most barren. But it also marked a turning point, signalling the moment when the winter days began to lengthen, promising light and fertility in the months that were to come. The birth of Christ, similarly, occurred just after the Winter Solstice. Christ was the Light of the World, bringing with him hopes of salvation and resurrection.

Returning to *The Druids*, the basic details of Pliny's account are carefully observed in Henry and Hornel's painting: the two white bulls in the foreground, the priest clad in white, the oak trees, the snow-covered winter landscape, the half-moon on the horizon and the golden sickle. The artists maintained that the bulls were modelled on an ancient breed of cattle and the physiognomy of the priests was based on close examination of Druid skulls, in order to lend the figures an air of authenticity.¹⁷

They almost certainly based their version of the druidical ceremony on the account given in William Mackenzie's *History of Galloway*, a copy of which remains in the library at Hornel's home,

16 James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890) (London: Macmillan, 1976), 235.

17 Robert Macaulay Stevenson notes, cited in Smith 1997, 59.

Broughton House in Kirkcudbright.¹⁸ Mackenzie even noted that female, as well as male, Druids participated in these sacred rituals, perhaps explaining the presence of the androgenous figure in the centre of the composition. He also observed that ‘... (i)n its original purity, Druidism inculcated the worship of a Supreme Being; the immortality of the soul, or at least, its perpetual transmigration; the exertion of courage; and abstinence from evil’.¹⁹

In terms of visual inspiration, the white-haired, bearded Arch-Druid on the left of the composition was inspired, not by druidical remains, but by an illustration in an 1815 book of costume that was widely reproduced,²⁰ while the features of the central priest were probably based on photographs of Native Americans that were widely distributed around the time of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* show. This spectacle had attracted thousands and ran for five months (from May 1887) in London, before touring to Birmingham, Manchester and Paris, coinciding with the Exposition Universelle of 1889.²¹ For many this event was their first opportunity to view diverse cultures on a global scale, albeit through the prism of French colonialism. And, although the Native Americans may have seemed like exotic and intriguing ‘savages’ to a European audience, there was still the sense that they represented an ancient, noble and dying race. Moreover, like the Druids, they were shamans, in possession of magical powers.

The writer Neil Munro recorded that, as they worked on the picture, Henry and Hornel bellowed out a druidical chant called *The Black Whale Inn of Askelon*.²² In reality *The Black Whale Inn* was a student drinking song or *commercium*, composed in the mid-19th century by Josef Viktor von Scheffel.²³ However, Hornel retained an interest in Druidism that stemmed from his membership of the Kirkcudbright Antiquarian Society. He was later elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Edinburgh and was able to attend their meetings, as well as read, and contribute to, their proceedings.²⁴

The composition of *The Druids* is pervaded with circular forms: the mistletoe branches, the designs and decorations on the priest’s robes, the golden sickle, the moon on the horizon and the winter landscape itself. Various commentators have observed that these circular forms, once again, allude to the cup-and-ring markings that fascinated Hornel – so much so that he made a number of sketches which were published, in 1887, in

- 18 William Mackenzie, *History of Gal-loway*, 2 vols, Kirkcudbright: John Nicholson, 1841.
- 19 William Mackenzie, *History of Gal-loway*, 33. Mackenzie cites his own source as Diogenes Laertius.
- 20 Samuel Rush Meyrick and Charles Hamilton Smith, *The Costume of the Original Inhabitants of the British Isles, from the Earliest Periods to the Sixteenth Century ...* (London: R. Havell, 1815), 7.
- 21 On this, see Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869–1922* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 22 Neil Munro, *The Brave Days: A Chronicle from the North* (Edinburgh: Porpoise Press, 1931), 268.
- 23 In Josef Viktor von Scheffel, *Gaudeamus, Lieder aus dem Engeren und Weiteren* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1868).
- 24 John Morrison, *Painting the Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 199.

the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*.²⁵ He also took photographs of the markings, some of which were then engraved and reproduced in a later supplement about the High Banks carvings.²⁶

To be archaeologically accurate, the cup-and-ring markings are Neolithic, rather than Celtic, but the proceedings may also have provided the source for the picture's frame, which is decorated with Celtic interlace.²⁷ John Morrison has attempted to identify specific sources for the decorative elements in the painting, including Pictish symbol stones and high-profile Celtic 'finds', such as the Aylesford Bucket (found in Kent in 1886), and the Battersea Shield.²⁸ Hornel was certainly looking to Celtic art in order to find a specifically Scottish 'brand' of decorative Symbolism. However, I would argue that many of the so-called Celtic references in the picture were intentionally universal. The snake, found on Pictish symbol stones, was sacred to the Druids and a symbol of wisdom, but is also present in several ancient cultures, including Norse (Jörmundgandr or the Midgard Serpent), Hindu and Egyptian mythology, and venerated by Native American tribes such as the Hopi. It signified strength and regeneration, due to the fact that the snake renewed itself through the shedding of its skin.²⁹ The scallop shell, visible on the shoulder of one of the priest's robes, was said to represent the setting sun and symbolised death and resurrection. Scallop shell scoops were used as early as 4300 BCE in the Inner Hebrides and there is a possibility that Hornel or Henry might have seen an example in the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.³⁰ On the other hand, scallop shells also have Christian symbolism and, more prosaically, are a feature of Georgian interior design.

Celtic sources do not explain the bright palette, which is the most prominent feature of *The Druids*. Its colour scheme of vermillion, emerald and gold was described by the critic Walter Armstrong as the picture's 'aesthetic *raison d'être*'.³¹ If it recalls the dominant (if now faded) colours of insular manuscripts,³² it is because Henry and Hornel almost certainly consulted pattern books such as Owen Jones's *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), in which original Celtic designs were reproduced using the new technique of chromolithography. Another source for the artists' brilliant colourism and thick impasto, was the work of the French artist Adolphe Monticelli, whose work had a major

25 George Hamilton, 'Notices of Rock-Sculpturings of Cups and Circles in Kirkcudbrightshire', *Proceedings of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. 21, 10 Jan 1887, 151–60. Hornel even had a cast made of the cup and ring markings, which he presented to the Stewartry Museum.

26 George Hamilton, 'Notice of Additional Groups of Carvings of Cups and Circles on Rock Surfaces at High Banks, Kirkcudbrightshire', *Proceedings of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland*, 23, 1888–89, 125–30 (11 February 1889), 126.

27 See especially J. Romilly Allen, 'Notes on Celtic Ornament: the Key and Spiral Patterns', *Proceedings of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland*, 19, 1884–85, 253–308.

28 John Morrison, 'Nationalism and nationhood: late-nineteenth-century painting in Scotland', in Michelle Facos and Sharon L. Hirsh (eds.), *Art, Culture and National Identity in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Cambridge, 2003), 199–200; Morrison, *Painting the Nation*, 192–97. The Battersea shield was discovered in the River Thames in 1857.

29 On symbolism in pagan art, see Hilda Roderick and Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Manchester University Press, 1988).

30 See, for example, the scallop shell from Cnoc Coig, on Oronsay (4500–4300 BCE), National Museums of Scotland.

31 *The Magazine of Art* 1890, 326.

32 On colour in Medieval Manuscripts, see H. Pulliam, 'Color', *Studies in Iconography*, Vol.33, *Medieval Art History Today*, 2012, 3–14.

impact on both artists from about 1888 onwards.³³ They were also inspired by Japanese prints, as discussed above, and by stained glass, which was enjoying a huge revival in Scotland during this period.³⁴

John Duncan, *The Evergreen* and *Anima Celtica*, 1895

Such eclecticism is also a key feature of the work of John Duncan, who was to become a major figure of the Scottish Celtic Revival. While Henry and Hornel were based in Galloway, Duncan hailed from Dundee in the East of Scotland and worked mainly in Edinburgh. He and Geddes established the University Hall School of Art, subsequently the Old Edinburgh School of Art, of which Duncan was first artistic director.³⁵ In 1895, Geddes invited him to contribute to *The Evergreen* and also commissioned him to create a series of murals at Ramsay Lodge, Edinburgh, which were reproduced in the *Studio* in 1897 (incidentally, in the same year as a work by Akseli Gallen-Kallela).³⁶ Duncan chose three Celtic heroes for his mural scheme: Fingal from Macpherson's *Ossian* saga, Cuchulain from the Ulster cycle, and the young king Arthur. He included 'authentic' Celtic items and decorated the surrounding frames with Celtic knotwork. His choice of images was pan-Celtic, but also nationalistic: Cuchulain defended his native Ulster from the rest of Ireland; Fingal is shown in combat with Swaran, son of Starvo, King of Lochlin (Norway); King Arthur is challenged by his Welsh half-sister, the evil Morgan Le Fay, who represents spiritual darkness as a threat to the historical and cultural continuity of the Britons.

We know from Duncan's Notebooks, deposited in the National Library of Scotland, that he steeped himself in Celtic history and folklore, much of which he read in French. Like Geddes, he adopted a global view of Celticism, which included Irish epic literature, popular Breton tales, Welsh bardic poetry and Manx legends – texts written by French, Welsh, Irish and English authors, such as Marie Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville, Vicomte Hersant de la Villemarqué, Sir John Rhys, Daniel O'Sullivan, A.H. Leahy and Charles Squire.³⁷ Like Henry and Hornel, Duncan aimed to breathe new life into Scottish painting through a fusion of Celtic myth, French Symbolist theory and an appropriately modern style of painting. His ideas were in tune with those of the French avant-

33 On this topic, see Frances Fowle, 'La Délicieuse Couleur Décorative: Van Gogh, Alexander Reid et l'influence de Monticelli en Ecosse', in *Van Gogh-Monticelli*, exhibition catalogue (Marseilles, 2008), 103–121.

34 On stained glass in Scotland, see Michael Donnelly, *Scotland's Stained Glass: Making the Colours Sing* (Mercat Press, 1997).

35 Geddes had been appointed to the Chair of Botany at University College, Dundee, in 1888. On Geddes and Duncan in Dundee, see Matthew Jarron (ed), *The Artist and the Thinker: John Duncan and Patrick Geddes in Dundee* (Dundee: University of Dundee Museum Services, 2004).

36 Some of Duncan's murals featured in Margaret Armour, 'Mural Decoration in Scotland', *Studio* 1897, 99–106. Gallen-Kallela's *Defence of the Sampo* was reproduced in 'Studio-Talk', *Studio* 1897, 61.

37 In his Notebooks (National Library of Scotland, Acc 6866) he lists (c. 1907–10) the following publications: J. Rhys *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx*, 2 vols, Oxford 1901; D'Arbois de Jubainville, *Cours de Littérature Celtique*; D'Arbois de Jubainville, *Catalogue de la Littérature Epique de l'Irlande*; Thomas Hersant de la Villemarqué, *Poèmes des Bardes Bretons du VI^e siècle*, Paris 1850; *Contes populaires des anciens Bretons. La Légende Celtique*, Paris 1842; D. O'Sullivan, *Irlande Poésie des Bardes*, Paris 1853; A.H. Leahy, *Heroic Romances of Ireland*, 2 vols, London 1905; Charles Squire, *The Mythology of the British Islands*, London 1905. Also *The Celtic Review*, *Celtia* – a Pan-Celtic monthly and the *Revue Celtique*. See Acc 6866/3, National Library of Scotland.

garde and during the 1890s he immersed himself in the esoteric theories of the notorious Sâr Péladan and the Salon of the Rose + Croix. Péladan was steeped in esotericism and the occult and, whereas Duncan sought a purer path, he, too, was fascinated by mysticism and the Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky. Although he did not join the Edinburgh Theosophical movement until 1907, he was interested from the outset in the interconnectedness of things, especially different spiritual beliefs.³⁸

Like many revivalists, including Sharp, Duncan believed ardently that the Celts were a creative, instinctive and deeply spiritual race. After a trip to the island of Eriskay (in the Outer Hebrides) in 1905, he vowed ‘to devote myself to the realisation of a spiritual art. To garner the crops of my imagination that they do not rot in the fields.’³⁹ He also connected Celtic art – because of its simplicity and synthetism – with the ‘Idea’, a neo-Platonic concept appropriated by the Symbolists, who believed that the underlying idea conveyed by a work of art was more important than its faithful representation. In his notes Duncan wrote that art ‘should not be judged by its resemblance to nature but by its expressive force’.⁴⁰

As I have discussed elsewhere, the illustrations that he produced for *The Evergreen* show the influence not only of Celtic art (including head and tail pieces inspired by the *Book of Kells*) and mythology, but of French Symbolism and of more esoteric sources, such as Egyptian art.⁴¹ Even though Sharp shared Duncan’s interest in Theosophy and mysticism, these more mysterious sources were downplayed by the promoters of the journal, who preferred to embrace Geddes’s notion of a Celtic ‘renaissance’.⁴²

Sharp’s original vision for *The Evergreen* was a thoroughly representative Anglo-Celtic quarterly that also included a detailed prospectus for a journal entitled ‘The Celtic World’ or *Anima Celtica*.⁴³ The first item would be a prologue entitled ‘The Celtic Renaissance’, followed by essays on ‘The World Anglo-Celtic’ and ‘Anglo-Celtic Magazines’. Contributors would include the Scottish Celtic revivalist Alexander Carmichael; the Welsh writer and editor Ernest Rhys; George Meredith, Celticist and future author of *Celt and Saxon* (1910); and W.B. Yeats, a major figure in the Irish Celtic Revival. The second edition would comprise items by ‘Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Manx, Cornish, & Breton writers’. In the end, Geddes’s French connections would prevail and the journal’s

38 It is also interesting to note that his wife, Christine Allen (m. 1912) was a grail seeker and fascinated by mysticism – she was associated with the mystic Dr John Goodchild, who gave psychic readings – and believed she had found the Holy Grail in a well at Glastonbury.

39 John Duncan Notebooks Acc 6866/2, 23, National Library of Scotland.

40 John Duncan Notebooks, Acc 6866, 1916, 120, National Library of Scotland.

41 See my essay (co-authored with Marja Lahelma), ‘Conceptualising the North at the Fin de Siècle: Germanic, Nordic, Celtic’, in Frances Fowle and Marja Lahelma (eds.), *The Idea of North: Mythmaking and Identities, Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, The Birch and the Star, 2019, <https://birchandstar.files.wordpress.com/2019/05/idea-of-north-introduction.pdf> (accessed 30 November 2019).

42 Indeed, the journal was overtly anti-decadent, as exemplified by the opening ‘Proem’. See Robin Nicholson, ‘“From Fever to Fresh Air”: *The Evergreen*, the *Yellow Book* and the threat of decadence’, *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, 9 (2004), 63–68.

43 Letter from William Sharp to Patrick Geddes, 3 March 1895, William Sharp (Fiona Macleod Archive) <https://www.ies.sas.ac.uk/research/william-sharp-fiona-macleod-archive/letters> (accessed 30 November 2019), (hereafter ‘Letters’) 25–28. The original prospectus is in the National Library of Scotland.



Fig. 2. John Duncan, *Anima Celta*, 1895. National Trust for Scotland
Photo: National Trust for Scotland / Antonia Reeve

Celtic contributions from Edith Wingate Rinder and others were somewhat overshadowed by articles by French anarchists, geographers and sociologists, such as Elisée Reclus and Abbé Félix Klein. In terms of Scottish identity, therefore, the first edition of *The Evergreen* (subtitled 'A Northern Seasonal') had a decidedly international outlook.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, one of the most representatively Celtic images in the journal is Duncan's *Anima Celtica* (1895), a deeply symbolic image, almost certainly based on an earlier painting (Fig. 2, National Trust for Scotland). In both works the Celtic soul or imagination is visualised as a female sorceress or perhaps psychic medium, conjuring up images of heroes from Celtic mythology. The images in the top half of the picture exist in the woman's imagination, or have been summoned up through her psychic powers. The legends emerge from a curious incense burner and the smoke from it divides the various elements and ends in a swirl of Celtic interlace. The woman's psychic 'episode' has apparently been prompted by the smell and intoxication of the incense. The painting further reflects the inward-looking Symbolism of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes through its simplification, flattened perspective and muted tones, which are especially evident in the figure of Deirdre.

In the printed version, the images are taken largely from James Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*, along themes of renaissance and regeneration: the Birth of Ossian, the Awakening of Cuchulain, and the swine of the Irish Tuath[a] de Danaan, who continually renew themselves. The painting is more obviously pan-Celtic: it depicts Deirdre of the Sorrows, who was betrothed to the King of Ulster, but who fell in love with a man from Erin (Ireland), then fled with him to Scotland; Mannan, the God of the Sea, who gives his name to the Isle of Man; and the Children of Lir, who were transformed into swans during the pagan era and regained their human form 300 years later, once Christianity had been brought to Ireland.⁴⁵

John Duncan's *St Bride*, 1913

A similar conflation of the pagan and Christian occurs in Duncan's *St Bride*, of 1913 (Fig. 3, National Galleries of Scotland). This colourful work in tempera shows the pagan Brigid, who became Saint Bride, the midwife who assisted at Christ's birth. Duncan

44 On this see further Frances Fowle and Belinda Thomson (eds.), *Patrick Geddes: The French Connection* (Oxford: White Cockade, 2004).

45 Much later, in 1924, Duncan produced a large-scale version of *The Children of Lir* in tempera (Dundee Art Galleries and Museums).

- 46 RSA Catalogue 1913, according to Lindsey Errington's notes in the picture file, the Scottish National Gallery.
- 47 'According to a legendary romance said still to be current in the Western Isles, Brigid or Bride is known as Muime Chriosd: the foster mother of Christ. With a glamour and not infrequently a beauty-spell characteristic of the writings of Fiona Macleod, the legend is retold as "Muime Chriosd, St Bride of the Isles" in *The Washer of the Ford!* Newspaper cutting in the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) picture file.
- 48 Sharp originally sent it under his own name to Anne Alden, the daughter of Henry Mills Alden, Editor of *Harper's Magazine*, as 'The Foster Mother of Christ'. See letter from William Sharp to Miss Anne Alden, 20 July 1895 (Letters, 1895b, 22).
- 49 Letter from Fiona Macleod to Dr John Goodchild, mid-May 1898, from the Outlook Tower (Letters 1898, 316–7).
- 50 Mediumistic literature was encouraged by the Theosophical movement with which both Duncan and Sharp were closely associated, and there are clear signs of Theosophical influence in Macleod's three-part story of Bride. In the story Iona and Bethlehem are not separated geographically but conflated through a mystical transformation. As a young woman, Bride drinks the water of eternal life, falls asleep and is reborn in Bethlehem in an enlightened state. There is no mention of her being carried by Angels over water.
- 51 Lindsay Errington has also argued that Macleod makes a link between Bride and the sea in another short story *The Gaelic Heart*, published in 1910. This tale includes a description of Bride as 'a Celtic Demeter – that Demeter Despoena born of the embrace of Poseidon, who in turn is no other than Lir, the Oceanus of the Gael (...). It is Demeter Brigid seeking her brother Manan, God of the Sea.' Fiona Macleod, 'The Gaelic Heart', in *The Winged Destiny: Studies in the Spiritual History of the Gael* (London, 1910), 210 (footnote). See L. Errington, 'Celtic Elements in Scottish art at the turn of the century', in John Christian (ed.), *The Last Romantics: Romantic Tradition in British Art – Burne-Jones to Stanley Spencer* (London, 1998).

depicts her being flown by angels across the sea towards Bethlehem. The angel's costumes are decorated with Celtic spirals and scenes from the New Testament.

In Celtic mythology Bride or Brigid was the giver of light and life, a symbol of the coming of Spring. Brigid's day was celebrated on 1 February, about halfway between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, a festival known as Imbolc in Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man. It is one of four Celtic Festivals (the others are Beltane, Lughnasa and Samain) but is also the equivalent of the Christian festival of Candlemas. Thematically, therefore, the painting has close links with Henry and Hornel's *The Druids* and *The Star in the East*. As the original catalogue entry for this painting explained: 'On the night of the first Christmas, Bride, the daughter of Dubhach the Druid, was carried by Angels from Iona to Bethlehem to help Mary in her weakness to care for the new-born babe.'⁴⁶

According to the critic for the *Glasgow Herald*, Duncan's source for *St Bride* was Fiona Macleod's short story *Miusme Chriosd*.⁴⁷ We know from William Sharp's memoirs, collated by his wife, that Fiona Macleod was inspired to write this legend after a visit to Iona in 1894 and it was in fact first published as 'Mary of the Gael' in the second edition of *The Evergreen* (Autumn 1895). The following year it appeared in *The Washer of the Ford and other Legendary Mortalities*, published by Patrick Geddes and colleagues and, much later, as *Bride of the Isles*, in Macleod's 'Iona' series, published in 1914.⁴⁸ Sharp later claimed that the inspiration for the tale came to him through a psychic transference: 'When I wrote certain of my writings (eg "Muisme Chriosd" and the "Three Marvels of Iona") I felt, rightly or wrongly, as though I had in some measure become interpretative of the spirit of "Colum the White".'⁴⁹ In other words, by taking on the female persona of Fiona Macleod he was able to act as a medium through which the spirit of Saint Columba was able to communicate.⁵⁰

Errington suggests that the prologue of Macleod's book *The Sin-Eater and other Tales* (first published in 1895), was a source for some of the descriptive detail in Duncan's painting, including the seal and the gull.⁵¹ Entitled 'From Iona', it describes springtime on the Sound of Iona, with seals 'putting their breasts against the running tide', 'a congregation of sea-fowl – gannets and guillemots, skuas and herring gulls', and the waters of the sound, which 'dance their blue bodies and



Fig. 3. John Duncan, *St Bride*, 1913. National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased 1946
 Photo: National Galleries of Scotland

swirl their flashing white hair o' foam'.⁵² Duncan denied such a specific source, writing in his 1912 Notebook: 'It is better to paint from memory; then your work will be your own property.'⁵³ Like many Symbolists, his intention was to suggest ideas; to evoke universal truths, rather than describe reality. Bride is depicted as child-like and youthful and, as the critic for the *Herald* explains, both her physical appearance and the voyage across water are intentionally symbolic, for '(t)he artist shows us a type of pure maidenhood being borne as though by her own intuitive longing to aid in the regeneration of the world',⁵⁴ and continues, 'Mr Duncan does not try to make humanly credible the angels in "St Bride". Emphatically he does, however, remove us to a realm of thought and

52 Fiona Macleod, *The Sin-Eater and Other Tales* (Edinburgh, 1895), 1–2.

53 John Duncan Notebooks 1912, 24.

54 Newspaper cutting in NGS picture file.

feeling in which, without much effort of mystical contemplation, verities of inner experience are imaged.⁵⁵

Conclusions

In conclusion, therefore, we are not intended to view Duncan's canvases as illustrations or as reflections of reality, but as 'envisionings'. All three artists discussed in this essay used Celtic art and myth as a stimulus, as a route towards the spiritual and the subconscious, or towards a more suggestive evocation of reality. In all three works – *The Druids*, *Anima Celtica* and *St Bride* – there is a sense of the visionary and of the artist as 'medium', drawing on the past to evoke a more universal idea, and linking them very specifically with European Symbolism.

From this brief survey, therefore, three clear themes emerge, contributing towards a more general definition of Scottish Celtic Revival painting. First, the pictures evoke a complex, pan-Celtic identity, whether in terms of Scotland's origins (the *Druids*) or in relation to shared mythologies (*Anima Celtica*). Secondly, the fusion of the pagan and the Christian is a constant, linking our cultural past to the present day. Lastly, these artists looked beyond Scotland for inspiration, drawing on Symbolism, Japanese art and even Theosophy in order to express their national identity through the universal language of the avant-garde. Together, these three works – even if they represent only one aspect of Scottish art at the end of the 19th century – give a sense of the richness and complexity of Celtic identity, as well as the diversity and internationalism of Scotland's cultural Revival.

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55 Newspaper cutting in NGS picture file.