Swift, the Book, and the Irish Financial Revolution
Moore, Sean D.

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Explaining Jonathan Swift’s role in the history of the Irish book is telling the story of a nation and its literature in the making. As the concept of imagined communities explains, modern nations are first created in the press, suggesting that the identity and sovereignty of the polity are inextricably bound to the success of their mediation in print. In Ireland’s case, the print media, as Declan Kiberd has argued, invented the Irish nation before it had a state. Swift was among the earliest major Anglo-Irish literary figures to participate in this invention, and he did so by exploiting the political potential of his country’s book craftsmen. He understood the relationship of a nationalist press to state formation; as Kiberd reminds us, he “assumed the existence of a patriotic entity named ‘Ireland’ in order to prove a constitutional and economic one.” The ideology that arose from this process formed an Irish identity that continues to be the basis of ideas of national sovereignty. What Swift and contemporary Irish publishers brought into being was a national brand of print culture that made a proprietary claim to a distinct media market and enabled the formation of a public that eventually could be recognized as the state itself. On the first count, Anglo-Irish literature, a category of that new market, enhanced the prestige and value of Irish books; it promoted “the medium-as-brand,” helping Irish publishing houses obtain a reputation. On the second count, Dublin booksellers and their London affiliates were also selling Irishness as an identity signifying the nation. Swift’s contribution to the invention of Ireland was staging it via a continuous branding event that helped constitute a national press and a political entity.

This “cultural branding,” the building of a brand, turned Anglo-Irish
literature into a cultural icon, an object of secular veneration digested and reproduced by consumers and citizens. As Douglas Holt has explained, some brands move beyond their significance in the marketplace to become synonymous with the nation. In his view, products that are very successful provide an “identity myth,” a story that, like national narrative itself, works as a salve for “contradictions in the nation's culture.” They evolve into “identity brands, the brands that have spun such compelling myths that they have become cultural icons.” To again work within Swift’s textile metaphor for national narrative, these identity myths are “useful fabrications” that repair “tears in the cultural fabric of the nation.”

As Donald Keough, a major philanthropist to Irish studies organizations, has written, some commercial power brands, like Coca-Cola, become linked to political ideas such as “freedom, democracy, equality, and a new beginning” to the extent that they become identical to political ideology. Anglo-Irish literature, a medium traditionally supplying Irish identity myths, is an iconic brand that maintains and revises the Irish nation’s narrative of its origins and future. It is thus partially synonymous with the nation to the extent that “Ireland” could not be understood without it.

A problem has arisen, however, in the brand’s management: globalization. Criticism and education have hitherto constituted the main means by which the brand of Anglo-Irish literature has been administered, and they have continually made it relevant in new historical circumstances. This cultivation of the brand is significant because it is related to the constitution of the sovereignty myth necessary for the state’s maintenance of political and economic control. It is possible that the brand, however, is currently in a state of crisis as the process of globalization hybridizes and homogenizes identity, and with it the very concept of national sovereignty. “Ireland” itself—like “America,” “India,” and other national identities—has signified feelings, associations, and images characteristic of the era of the nation-state. Ireland’s identity as a sovereign nation has been linked to its history of struggle with imperialism, colonialism, and other forms of military and cultural violence. The story of its overcoming of these obstacles has been typical of postcolonial countries’ self-constitution as independent entities. As those countries have reconnected to or strengthened their connections with the outside world through the process of globalization, a gap has grown between the brand identity of
the nation-state and its cultural brands. In Ireland, there has been an attenuation of the link between political sovereignty and cultural production, as cultural outlets have increasingly advertised global brands and their associative identity effects to the extent that consumers now identify less with national politics and more with what they are consuming. In general, there seems to have been a decline in the Irish national iconic brands that have helped bind national narrative to national consumption. In these circumstances, it is hard to make the case for Anglo-Irish literature’s current political relevance within the country, although its creation and preparation for export does contribute to the building of the national identity globally in a manner that aids the tourism industry.

The recent meltdown in the global credit markets suggests that we may be moving into a new era in which nations must again consider the connections between their financial situation, issues of sovereignty, and the state of their national cultures. The history of an impoverished colony’s understanding of those links and its remedies for its problems may inform our contemporary thinking about globalization and its effect on national cultural identity. Factions that included writers encouraged the rise of an Irish national culture industry that could form a public amenable to the political solutions they considered necessary to improve its condition, developments which may be instructive in the future. As globalization changes the environment in which national cultural brands exist, the question that we must ask is, “will we see another Swift?”