Gaelic Scotland in the Colonial Imagination

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Neither the progressivism of the Enlightenment nor romantic Celticism died out during the nineteenth century. But they now were complemented by a third discursive strand, which came to run parallel with (and partly also intermingled) with them: older cultural stereotypes solidified into biologistic racial typology. This is not to imply that these accounts were only preoccupied with biological, that is, physical, characteristics, or that biology was already a fully developed “scientific” discipline in the modern sense. For instance, not all nineteenth-century race discourse attempted to substantiate its claims with (quasi-)“scientific” quantitative data, head measurements, and so on; even the anatomist Robert Knox rather relies on philosophical, historical, and cultural reflections. The same applies to many other thinkers on the subject. Moreover, despite the component of physicality and heredity, the question of just how predetermined and static the bodily and mental features of “races” really were—for example in relation to intermixture and evolution—was answered differently by different thinkers. Nonetheless, race theory did assume some form of physical basis (hereditary character, coloring, physiognomy, etc.) which could supposedly be connected to sociocultural issues, and this makes notions of cultural difference, development, and hierarchy more inflexible than before. Initially, racialization entailed a more pessimistic view of Celticity. Enlightened progressivism thought the center superior over the “primitive” periphery, but was confident that even the latter had great potential for improvement. Romanticism saw at least some “primitive” features as noble and worthy of conservation, but—somewhat wistfully—shared the belief that development was possible, and already happening. Racism called the feasibility of civilizing missions into question. It shared Enlightenment beliefs in metropolitan preeminence and primitive inferiority, but doubted that “primitive” peoples could ever assimilate to metropolitan standards. Cultural boundaries and hierarchies seemed much more immutable. This justified prevailing social inequalities; for instance, even where colonized
populations appeared to have been somewhat “improved” or “domesticated” by empire, it was declared that their underlying “racial inferiority” still made them unfit for parity and rule.

**Teutonist History, Economic Change, and Public Opinion**

Although race theory often doubts the possibility of civilizing missions, the origins of anti-Celtic racism in Scotland lay in a period when the “civilizability” and integration of the Gaels into the mainstream seemed highly probable and already underway, that is, the late eighteenth century. In fact, sometimes it was these very successes which sparked anti-Celtic sentiments, as several Lowlanders felt that the Ossianic hype, the fame of Highland regiments, and the transformation of Highland iconography into pan-national symbols threatened to marginalize Lowland Scottish traditions and achievements. Several non-Gaelic Scottish intellectuals reacted by reaffirming older notions about the negative traits of Gaelic mentality and its irredeemable otherness. The increasing hybridization of the former Other and its successful entry into the mainstream created anxiety among the mainstream’s “older” occupants about a potential loss of their superiority. The “old mainstreamers” from the Lowlands—long used to being the “superior” part of Scotland’s population, and also integrated into the pan-British mainstream for slightly longer—reacted by reaffirming the very difference that was in fact disappearing, portraying the Gaels as incorrigibly alien.

The Lowland antiquarian and philologist John Jamieson (1759–1838) and the Orcadian historian Malcolm Laing (1762–1818) both seemed anxious to downplay the Gaelic element in Scotland’s heritage and emphasize Lowland achievement instead. Jamieson’s linguistic analysis of the Scots language minimized the acknowledgment of Gaelic influences. Besides the Gaels, the second major early medieval “founding people” of Scotland were the Picts. Jamieson asserts that the Picts were not Celts, but Goths, that is, a “Teutonic” people like modern Lowlanders. Laing originally admired James Macpherson and Celticism, but later changed sides and developed strong anti-Celtic, pro-Germanic leanings.\(^4\)

The most abusive and most openly racist Scottish intellectual of that period was John Pinkerton. Like Laing, he was a former Macphersonist turned Teutonist, and like Jamieson he rejected the popular claim that the Gaels were Scotland’s original inhabitants. Instead, he asserted that the nation’s true ancestors were the Picts, whom he considered as Teutonic Goths.\(^5\) For Pinkerton, the Celts were a morally and physically inferior race—savage, lazy, and weak—that once was Europe’s aboriginal population, but had been conquered by a superior race of “Scythian” or “Gothic” invaders (he uses these two terms synonymously). He likens the Celts to indigenous populations of modern overseas colonies: “The Celts were so inferior . . . , being to
the Scythians as a negro to an European, that . . . to see them, was to conquer them; . . . and . . . they had no arts, nor inventions, of their own.”6 “To see them, was to conquer them” might be an allusion to Caesar’s famous bon mot “Veni, vidi, vici,” and thus another example of how Roman discourse colored modern British readers’ perceptions of the “Celts” of their own time and of colonized peoples overseas, and how Celtic Others provided a discursive bridge across the geographical and temporal chasms between ancient and modern empires. Pinkerton’s associative leap from Europe’s Celtic margins to overseas colonies becomes explicit in his comparison between Celts and black people, both placed on the lowest step of the ladder of social evolution from savagery via barbarism to civilization. Black people are not the only modern overseas “savages” to whom the Celts are likened. Native Americans and Pacific Islanders also feature in Pinkerton’s equations. He asserts that the ancient Celts had been to the Gothic incomers “what the savages of America are to the Europeans.”7 Furthermore, he claims:

The Celts had no monuments any more than the savage Americans or Samoiedes. . . . The manners of the Celts perfectly resembled those of the present Hottentots. . . . What their . . . mythology was we do not know, but in all probability resembled that of the Hottentots, or others of the rudest savages, as the Celts anciently were, and are little better at present, being incapable of any progress.8

This alignment with nonwhite overseas populations underscores the impression that the Celts are an “inferior race,” just as primitive and Other as Native Americans, black Africans, or Pacific Islanders allegedly were. According to Pinkerton, the Celts “are savages, have been savages since the world began, and will be for ever savages while a separate people; that is, while themselves, and of unmixed blood.”9 As such, they had always been a millstone round Scotland’s neck, delaying the nation’s Lowland-propelled journey on the path to progress. Pinkerton claimed that even in his own time they still were mere radical savages, not yet advanced even to a state of barbarism; and if any foreigner doubts this, he has only to step into the Celtic part of Wales, Ireland, or Scotland, and look at them, for they are just as they were, incapable of industry or civilization, even after half their blood is Gothic, and remain, as marked by the ancients, fond of lies, and enemies of truth.10

Indicting Celts as liars might imply another parallel between Celts and non-European Others: beyond potential allusions to Macpherson’s Ossianic (part-)forgeries, untruthfulness is apparently also considered a general racial characteristic, and as such might place Celts on a par with “Orientals,” who have likewise been frequently portrayed as deceitful.
Comparisons between ancient “Celts,” modern “Celts,” and modern non-European colonized peoples were nothing new. But it had usually been assumed that these Others could be lifted up from their “inferior” stage of civilization. Pinkerton, by contrast, believed otherness and inferiority to be essentially immutable, thus anticipating nineteenth-century racism. For him, Teutons and Celts, like Europeans and Africans, were distinct races classed in an unalterable hierarchy. The weaknesses of the “inferior races” could not be rooted out—either by education or by racial intermixture. In Pinkerton’s view it was always the weaker, Celtic inheritance which surfaced in hybrid offspring, so that intermarriage with inferior peoples would lead Teutons to racial degeneration. As an example, Pinkerton cites the aristocracy of early medieval Dál Riata, who in his view were no Gaels, but of Gothic stock—apparently because their considerable achievements would have belied his dogma of Gaelic incapability, so that he had to redefine the Dálriatans as part-Teuton to uphold his prejudiced claims. He argues that this Gothic Dálriatan elite became degenerate in blood and language because they intermarried with Gaels.

Pinkerton’s contempt for everything Gaelic extended to the language itself, which he perceived as markedly inferior, a mere gibberish only held together by loanwords from other, superior languages. Further signs of inferiority are identified in Celtic physiognomy and conduct:

The Lowlanders . . . are as different from the Highlanders, as the English are from the Wel[s]h. The race is so extremely distinct as to strike all at first sight. . . . The Lowlanders are tall and large, with fair complexions, and often with flaxen, yellow, and red hair, and blue eyes; the grand features of the Goths. . . . The lower classes of the Highlanders are . . . diminutive, . . . except some of the Norwegian descent; with brown complexions, and almost always with black curled hair, and dark eyes. In mind and manners the distinction is as marked. The Lowlanders are acute, industrious, sensible, erect, free. The Highlanders indolent, slavish, strangers to industry.

As Fenyö points out, this parallels contemporaneous developments in anthropology, which from the 1780s and 1790s onwards constructed racial hierarchies and presented small bodily stature as an indicator of racial inferiority. In Pinkerton’s account, Celts are not only racially but also aesthetically inferior: contemporary ideals of beauty preferred fair skin and hair, as well as blue eyes, so that darker “races,” including the allegedly dark-haired Gaels, are supposedly uglier than their light-colored Teutonic superiors. Fenyö plausibly suggests that the alleged darkness of not only Highland hair but also Highland skin, as well as the adjective “slavish,” might be intended to emphasize similarities between Gaels and black people. She stresses that African physique and supposed inferiority were much discussed during that period,
and often in terms which corresponded to Pinkerton’s juxtaposition of Celts and Teutons. Carl von Linné, a pioneer of racial anthropology, portrayed white people in terms of virtues like inventiveness, order, and cleverness, and black people as deceitful, indolent, and incapable of self-rule. At that time, however, such distinctions were usually made only between Europeans and non-Europeans, not among the Europeans themselves. Pinkerton’s Celtic-African alignments use widespread public acceptance of black people’s inferiority in order to gain support for his own (then much more controversial) thesis of Gaelic racial inferiority. Pinkerton is thus one of the first authors to invent racial distinctions among white Europeans, an invention which mainstream opinion only adopted several decades later.

In earlier periods, intra-European Others like the “Celts,” and traditional ways of textualizing them, had served as a model for descriptions of more recently encountered overseas “savages.” Now the flow of influence changed direction: the idea of immutable biological distinctions, first used to denigrate non-European indigenous populations, was gradually imported into intra-European othering. As non-European peoples seemed more obviously “other” and inferior than Europe’s “Celtic” fringes, the latter’s otherness could be made more plausible by claiming analogies between them and non-European “races.”

For commentators like Pinkerton, this need to reaffirm Gaelic otherness and inferiority via hardened, “racial” distinctions was still mainly based on the success of contemporary “civilizing missions,” whose efficiency caused Lowland anxieties about Gaelic competition and a loss of their own dominance. Anti-Gaelic racism was not yet a dominant viewpoint in the national zeitgeist. This was soon to change: nineteenth-century Highland economic crises seemed to suggest that the mission of civilizing the Gaidhealtachd and transforming it into a prosperous, well-integrated part of the nation was bound to fail after all. Many mainstream commentators were unwilling to blame the region’s increasing pauperism on the capitalist system itself, for example, the mutability of the system’s markets and the necessary ups and downs in its economic cycles. Instead, they blamed its victims, crediting them with an unrefrangible racial character whose laziness and other inborn defects doomed even the best development plans to failure. Anti-Gaelic racism became more common, though it never entirely replaced the romantic streak of Highlandism which coexisted with it throughout the nineteenth century—and which survived even beyond, long after anti-Celtic racism had dwindled.

One economic problem was the chieftains’ spending habits: those profits which were not swallowed up by debt payments were usually not invested in sustained economic development of the Highland region, but squandered for personal aristocratic consumption elsewhere—a problem also associated with colonial or neocolonial comprador bourgeoisies. The Gaidhealtachd’s economy reached crisis point when the growth sectors of the “improvement”
era foundered during the early nineteenth century, especially after the Napo-
leonic Wars. Overcrowding of land was exacerbated by homecoming soldiers. Demand for Highland products had heavily depended on the war economy; in peacetime, demand and prices fell. There were few alternative lines of business to cushion the fall. As James Shaw Grant put it, “the Highlands had only three commodities to offer the world market, all of them vulnerable to colonial exploitation. Agricultural products . . . fisheries . . . people.”¹⁵ The kelp industry collapsed in 1825. Pauperism and rent arrears also had psychological effects: despair and resignation often reduced the clan commoners’ willingness to make economic efforts—possibilities for which were limited enough in the first place. This affirmed Lowland and English stereotypes about traditional Highland laziness. The only economic fields which now promised profit were sheep farming and the new trend to transform Highland estates into deer-hunting grounds and holiday homes for the wealthy. None of these needed many laborers, so that much of the Highland population became economically superfluous. This resulted in further clearances, evictions, and emigration (now often with landlord and government support) to Lowland cities or the colonies.¹⁶

Racist ideologies about Celtic inferiority could be used to justify expulsion, extinction, or at best complete assimilation without preserving any aspects of “noble savagery.” Gaelic “Celts” were branded as an irredeemably backward, unimprovable race which threatened to corrupt the Saxon Lowlanders as well if kept any longer in proximity to them, and which appeared increasingly obsolete in a scheme of evolution that demanded the survival of the fittest races only.

A relatively early commentator who linked this kind of racial thought to economic crisis in the Highlands was Patrick Sellar, a solicitor from Morayshire with an Edinburgh education who was an estate administrator and sheep farmer in Sutherland during the Clearances.¹⁷ His writings on the subject are often reminiscent of colonial discourse, for instance when he describes the Gaels as a “savage” population living “in a country of sloth and idleness.”¹⁸ But his views on how to tackle this “savagery” varied, reflecting shifts in the general zeitgeist. Until about 1810, Sellar seems to have believed in progress through developmental aid, like investment in building, infrastructure, and agricultural improvement. Wholesale clearances or evictions did not yet seem an unavoidable precondition for development. Later, his opinion of the Highlands and its population became more pessimistic. While he still retained some belief in civilizing missions, these could now only be effected through clearances, the introduction of large sheep farms in the fertile inland glens, and the forced resettlement of tenants on the coast as fishermen.¹⁹ Sellar commended these measures as follows: “the proprietors humanely ordered this . . . most benevolent action, to put those barbarous hordes into a position, where they could . . . apply to industry, educate their children, and advance in civilization.”²⁰ Again, several motifs are reminiscent of colonial
discourse: the “natives” are denigrated as “barbarous hordes,” expropriation and coercion into a new social order are deemed a praiseworthy civilizing mission, and this mission also entails education and the extinction of native laziness by teaching the “natives” skills which are economically profitable to the colonizer/landlord.

Another colonial motif, familiar from overseas contexts and romantic British Highlandism, occurs in a note Sellar penned in 1816. Here, the “Celt” is partly romanticized, but only within safe limits. Attempts to defend “Celtic” traditions are only noble when confined to the remote past, that is, antiquity, while the traditionalism displayed by Gaels in Sellar’s time inspires nothing but disgust. Modern Gaels are not portrayed as noble savages, but through nineteenth-century concepts of inevitable and contemptible racial decline:

[They are] the sad remnant of a people who once covered a great part of Europe, and who so long and so bravely withstood the invading . . . Roman Empire. Their obstinate adherence to the barbarous jargon of the times when Europe was possessed by Savages, their rejection of any of the several languages now used in Europe, and which being sprung or at least improved from those of the greatest nations of antiquity, carry with them the collected wisdom of all ages, and have raised their possessors to the most astonishing pitch of eminence and power—Their [sic] seclusion . . . from this grand fund of knowledge, places them, with relation to the enlightened nations of Europe in a position not very different from that betwixt the American Colonists and the Aborigines of that Country. The one are the Aborigines of Britain shut out from the general stream of knowledge and cultivation, flowing in upon the Commonwealth of Europe from the remotest fountain of antiquity. The other are the Aborigines of America equally shut out from this stream; Both live in turf cabins in common with the brutes; Both are singular for patience, courage, cunning and address. Both are most virtuous where least in contact with men in a civilized State, and both are fast sinking under the baneful effects of ardent spirits [alcohol].

Sellar’s increasingly negative view of Gaeldom is also reflected in a passage which asserts that the Highlanders lack “every principle of truth and candour.” However, even at that point Sellar apparently still believed that decline was not inevitable, and that it might be redeemed through appropriate policies, such as the eviction of tenants from their old habitat and their removal to new fishing townships. Even then he remained a believer in civilizing missions, at least to a certain extent. But over the years his pessimism seems to have increased further, until overseas emigration was deemed the only viable answer. Already in 1816 he assessed some tenants’ migration plans as follows: “It would be a most happy thing if they did [emigrate]. . . .
They are just in that state of society for a savage country . . ., when landed in the woods of America.”24 By 1832, he apparently believed that the emigration of almost all native Highlanders was the best solution.25

Economic crisis in the Highlands and anti-Gaelic racism in anglophone popular opinion reached a climax in the 1840s and early 1850s through the potato crop failure caused by a fungus, and through the resulting famine. More famously, the famine also devastated Ireland, where it arrived a year earlier. In Scotland’s northwestern Highlands and the Hebrides, many people were on the verge of starvation for several years, but unlike in Ireland there were few actual deaths. Mitigating factors included the better situation of the Scottish economy at large, and a relatively efficient aid machinery. Nonetheless, the situation in the Highlands was severe and received considerable attention in the press and wider public opinion, where Fenyo identifies three kinds of response: first, blaming economic problems on alleged faults in the Gaels’ ethnic or racial character; second, sympathy and social criticism; and third, romanticization, for instance of a better Highland past or of the now-emptyed landscapes. While these tendencies often existed side by side, ethnic or racial denigration seems to have been the strongest one, at least during the 1840s and early 1850s.26

The “Saxon race” was deemed superior: “the contrast . . . between the habits and condition of the . . . two races . . . living side by side, point[s] . . . to the main cause of destitution. . . . The evil is in the character and the inveterate habits of the [Celtic/Gaelic] race.”27 Among the most frequently cited flaws of Gaelic racial character was laziness. This was not only a racial but also a class issue: in Victorian times, poor people in general were often blamed for laziness, no matter which “race” or nation (English or Scottish) they belonged to. It was often thought that all those poor people should best be disposed of—a notion advanced, for instance, by Herbert Spencer’s Social Statistics, or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness (1851) and later by social Darwinism. The wish to dispose of unwanted paupers, even English ones, was often linked to race discourse, for example when the poor were portrayed as a degenerate part of the English race which threatened to corrupt the entire race.28 Even non-Celtic paupers were often seen as lazy people who needed lessons in diligence, but Fenyo plausibly argues that such ideas were even stronger with regard to the Gaelic poor.29 Thus, one newspaper article asserted that “the consequences of the late failure in the potato crop a virtuous people would have got over; but here the calamity fell on a degraded and indolent race.”30 For several centuries, various authors had claimed the Highlanders for the Scottish or British nation by stressing their difference from the Irish. Now, the Highlanders were re-othened and placed again in the same category as the Irish. Both kinds of Gaels were deemed lazy and dirty by dint of their racial character.31 The journalist James Bruce expressly uses ideas of racial inferiority to debunk romantic clichés of Gaelic noble savagery:
Highlanders tell us of... their noble pride, their manly independence, and so on—but... what is considered respectable in the Highlands would be called meanness in the Lowlands. ... What is called working in the Highlands would be called play in the Lowlands. ... The Highlander[s']... pride... would be more... to his credit, and much more for the good of the society, if it would make him too proud to remain the starving indolent serf of a mighty chief, with centuries of ancestors of unpronounceable names—if it would make him proud enough to remove... to a locality where a comfortable livelihood is to be had for hard labour.  

Morally and intellectually they are an inferior race to the Lowland Saxon—and... before they can in a civilised age be put in a condition to provide for themselves and not to be throwing themselves on the charity of the hard-working Lowlander, the race must be improved by a Lowland intermixture, their habits, which did well enough in a former stage of society, must be broken up by... Lowland example.

Bruce expresses surprise that such a degree of barbarism, which he so far had only known from books about non-Europeans, could be found so close to home.

However, Bruce’s hope for the beneficial effects of Lowland intermixture shows that in the 1840s many who believed in the Gaels’ racial inferiority still thought that racial flaws could be improved by education or intermixture. Educating the “inferior race” was also important in famine relief measures, which were organized as another civilizing program. One strategy to root out Gaelic indolence involved a particular approach to food rations. These were scant enough in any case: just enough to ensure subsistence, and only half the usual prison ration. But even these scant famine relief rations were only given in exchange for extremely hard labor in specially created employment schemes. Some of these schemes aimed at estate improvement, for instance through drainage, but others were pointless tasks intended solely to promote labor as an end in itself, for instance in building a useless tower in the middle of a loch. At times, another required sign of racial improvement was cleanly housekeeping.

Gradually, the attitudes of landlords, government, and the general public became increasingly skeptical about the Gaels’ racial improvement potential. Now, racial discourse often asserted that the Highlanders’ plight was a natural consequence of historical evolution and racial destiny:

The utilitarian march of Lowland enterprise must inevitably settle this question by the imperious laws of political economy, and the function of the philanthropist will not be in attempting to prevent the conversion... but in the modification of the process by mercy
and kindness to the poor Celt. Gradually he was driven from the flat country to the mountain because active energetic people could apply the plain to use. The same people now find in sheep-farming a use for the mountain, and, by the gradual . . . pressure which drives the idle out . . ., the Celts must give up the mountain to the sheep-farmer. He must be “improved out.”

This suggests the inevitability and legitimacy of replacing racially inferior Celtic Highland tenants by capitalistically more profitable forms of land use imported mainly by a Teutonic race of Lowlanders and Englishmen. If any solution for the Highland problem still seemed possible, it lay in emigration. While the Gaels’ alleged racial character now made them incapable of learning better ways at home, abroad they were suddenly thought improvable.

Ethnologically the Celtic race is an inferior one . . . destined to give way . . . before the higher capabilities of the Anglo-Saxon. In the meantime, . . . as a part of the natural law which had already pushed the Celt from continental Europe westward, emigration to America is the only available remedy for the miseries of the race, whether squatting listlessly in filth and rags in Ireland, or dreaming in idleness and poverty in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

Fenyö aptly comments that “this amounted to nothing less than the theory of race decay.” Those who did not even believe in the Gaels’ potential for self-improvement abroad at least saw in emigration an improvement for the British mother country which could thus be rid of that un-Saxon, degraded Celtic race. There was even talk of a “final settlement” by deporting the immense number of 30,000 to 40,000 people to Australia—which, however, was not put into practice. Officially, the author of this suggestion masked his plans as philanthropy, but private communications revealed that his main motive was racial cleansing. He hoped that deported Gaels could be replaced by people who were less “other” to the Teutonic British mainstream of Lowlanders and Englishmen: he wanted to resettle the Highlands with Teutonic Germans, “an orderly, moral, industrious and frugal people, less foreign to us than the Irish or Scotch Celt, a congenial element which will readily assimilate with our body politic.” This racist resettlement plan eerily foreshadows schemes developed in the 1930s and 1940s to replace an allegedly inferior “Slavonic race” with German colonizers in eastern Europe. In mid-nineteenth-century Scotland, the influence of racist theorizing sometimes appears to have made eviction measures even more brutal than before.

Racist currents also inform nineteenth-century scholarship on Scottish history. Although Pinkerton’s wilder flights of fancy (e.g., describing the Picts as Goths) became less acceptable, the essence of his Teutonism remained current and attributed anything valuable in Scotland’s heritage to the Anglo-Saxon
element of the country’s post-Pictish history. Several historians, such as John Hill Burton or Thomas Carlyle, either ignored the Gaels entirely or relegated them to the role of lazy, wild barbarians ultimately subjugated by their Teutonic superiors, the united brotherhood of Englishmen and Lowland Scots. Like Jamieson, Burton denied the importance of Gaelic influences on the Scots language, and like Pinkerton he assumed that the Celts were a separate, inferior race destined to give way to a conquering race of Germanic invaders, as the Romano-British had done.41

Partly such anti-Celtic biases were reinforced by anxieties about the stability of British rule in Ireland, where a growing anti-imperial nationalist movement often used Gaelic cultural distinctness for political ends. Many Scottish-British patriots took pride in the empire and its sway over Ireland. The Gaelic, and thus part-Irish, element in Scottish history had to be played down.42 To admit that Scotland had developed from a “Dark Age” Irish colonial movement would have meant an uncanny reversal of these regions’ modern roles, where Scotland was not only a globally imperialist junior partner but had also played a key role in colonizing Ulster.

Victorian Anthropology: Anti-Celticism in Robert Knox’s The Races of Men

The racial typology which informed historical scholarship and public opinion was objectified through Victorian anthropology, which often distinguished not only between a white/European “master race” and the various “inferior” overseas “races” it was allegedly destined to subdue, but also between several white “races,” such as Teutonic, Celtic, and Slavonic ones. Intra-European racial distinctions frequently appeared just as clear and insurmountable as the distinction between Europeans and Africans or Native Americans. Typologies of racial character built on older stereotypes about ethnic traits and habits of Self and Other, as when the laziness and irrationality of “barbarian races” were juxtaposed against the diligent work ethic and rationality of “civilized” Saxons. Such juxtapositions had long been in use with regard to both Celtic and non-European (e.g., “Oriental”) Others, but previously often implied that civilizing missions were able to improve racial character. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, alleged ethnic character traits were ossified into eternal anthropological fixities.43

An early example from Victorian science is the Edinburgh anatomist and physiologist Alexander Walker, whose work in the 1830s employed “principles of physiognomy to delineate the different racial characteristics of Celts and Goths” in England, Scotland, and Ireland.44 Walker’s views also inspired the influential Scottish anatomist Robert Knox, whose interest in comparative anatomy and ethnology already became manifest during the 1820s and 1830s. During the 1840s, Knox gave public lectures on his racialist theories
in many British cities. These lectures became the basis of his book _The Races of Men_, which appeared in 1850. He criticized the way in which older usage had employed the term “race” in a looser way as a mere synonym for “nation” or “cultural community”:

The term race . . . is not . . . new . . ., but I use it in a new sense; . . . whilst [previously] the statesman . . . and . . . scholar . . . attached no special meaning to the term . . .; or refused to follow out the principle to its consequences; or ascribed the moral difference in the races . . . to fanciful causes, such as education, religion, climate, &c.

(Races of Men 7–8)

The new concept of race which Knox advocates is strictly biologicist: each race has peculiar “physical and mental qualities” (56), and “human character, individual and national, is traceable solely to the nature of that race to which the individual or nation belongs” (v). Intellectual and cultural history, as well as linguistic differences, are mere correlatives of racial biology: “race in human affairs is everything . . . : literature, science, art—in a word, civilization, depends on it.” Nation and state are dismissed as artificial constructs (4); he asserts that the only natural and viable source of collectivity and identity is race. The essence of racial character is, according to Knox, unalterable—not even “interbreeding” can produce lasting change because he considers hybrids as ultimately nonreproductive, or bound to revert to one of the constituent pure types after a few generations. Evolution over time within the same race is likewise declared impossible: a race’s typical “countenances, . . . forms, . . . organization, . . . [and] mental disposition . . . never alter. Modified they may be by time and circumstances, but they alter not” (337). While romantic thought had sometimes assumed a timeless ethnic character only for “primitive” peoples like “Celts” or “Orientals,” but considered the occupants of the center (often “Teutonic” cultures) as dynamic and evolving, for Knox even the civilized races have not altered much over the centuries: even Saxons have remained essentially unchanged since Roman times (11).

Within the British Isles, the “Saxon race” has a binary opposite in the “Celtic race.” Knox states that many of his contemporaries accept racialist anthropological distinctions between Europeans and non-Europeans, but are still reluctant to apply similar ideas to _intra_-British cultural differences. His own application of race theory to the peoples of the British Isles is seen as an important conceptual innovation.

As a consequence of . . . misdirection, on the mere mention of the word race, the popular mind flies off to Tasmania, the polar circle, or the land of the Hottentot. Englishmen . . . can scarcely be made to comprehend, that races of men, differing as widely from each other
as races can possibly do, inhabit, not merely continental Europe, but portions of Great Britain and Ireland. And next to the difficulty of getting this . . . admitted . . ., has been an unwillingness to admit the full importance of race, militating as it does against the . . . prejudices of the so-called civilized state of man; opposed as it is to the Utopian views based on education, religion, government. (23–24, Knox’s italics)

“Utopian views” alludes to the progressivism and universalism which characterized Enlightenment texts on “primitive” peoples and “civilizing missions,” as well as eighteenth-century attempts to forge a unified British nation out of different ethnic components. The application of racial theories to Europe is also advocated in the following passage:

When the word race . . . is spoken of, the English mind wanders immediately to distant countries; to Negroes and Hottentots, Red Indians and savages. He admits that there are people who differ a good deal from us, but not in Europe; there, mankind are clearly of one family. . . . But the object of this work is to show that the European races . . . differ from each other as widely as the Negro does from the Bushman; the Caffre from the Hottentot, the Red Indian of America from the Esquimaux; the Esquimaux from the Basque. (44, also see 76–78, 80–81)

Knox criticizes generalizing notions of a unified “European civilization,” “an abstraction which does not exist”: “To me the Caledonian Celt of Scotland appears a race as distinct from the Lowland Saxon . . . as any two races can possibly be: as negro from American; Hottentot from Caffre; Esquimaux from Saxon.”48 Most races in his typology are endowed with negative and positive characteristics—even some non-Europeans like Arabs and selected Africans are credited with certain virtues. Nonetheless, there is a clear sense of racial hierarchy, with several European “races” at the top. Among the most superior is the “Saxon” or “Scandinavian” race, although even their character is not without flaws. The position of the “Celts” is more ambiguous: in a global or pan-European context they are usually classed among the most superior races. In an inner-British context, they usually appear as markedly inferior to their Saxon neighbors. This oscillation of Knox’s Celts between master and subject race is one more manifestation of the Celts’ ambivalent position in the general history of colonial, anti-, and postcolonial discourse as both (or alternately) colonizer and colonized, Same and Other.

The Saxons, who dominate England and Lowland Scotland (138, 318), are credited with many characteristics that are familiar from metropolitan Anglo-British self-descriptions since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These self-portraits are strongly marked by middle-class values, by a
capitalist work ethic, and by patriotic pride in Britain’s constitutional monarchy, its Protestantism, and its overseas empire. For Knox, support for the Reformation is a Saxon racial characteristic (3–4)—and so is the love of freedom and democracy.49 The Saxon is also characterized by great self-assurance and self-confidence (e.g., 46, 54), an “abhorrence for theory—that is, for science” (10, also see 58), common sense (169), an “acquisitive and applicative genius” (10), materialism (169), and utilitarianism (412).

Thoughtful, plodding, industrious beyond all other races, a lover of labour . . .; he cares not its amount if it be but profitable; large handed, mechanical, a lover of order, of punctuality in business, of neatness and cleanliness. In these qualities no race approaches him. (53–54)

Accumulative beyond all others, the wealth of the world collects in their hands. (54)

The practical Saxons live only in the present and future, interested neither in the past (58) nor in metaphysical or speculative intellectual pursuits. Their desire for action and exertion is reflected in their preference for sports (54). Athleticism is also manifest in their physical appearance, foreshadowing late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European Aryanism where fitness and fair coloring go hand in hand: “a tall, powerful, athletic race of men; the strongest, as a race, on the . . . earth. They have fair hair, with blue eyes, and so fine a complexion, . . . almost . . . the only absolutely fair race on the . . . globe” (50).

Nonetheless, even the Saxons possess physical flaws: “Generally speaking, they are not a well . . . proportioned race, . . . the torso being large, vast, and disproportioned” (50). Flaws of intellect and character include their “contempt for art” (10) and a lack of creative genius (58). “[The Saxon’s] genius is wholly applicative, for he invents nothing. In the fine arts, and in music, taste cannot go lower. The race in general has no musical ear” (54). The Saxons’ coarse art is even lumped with that of non-European peoples, which momentarily blurs the boundary between English “civilized” coloniser and Asian “barbarian” colonized (219). The epitome of art and civilization is located in ancient Greece (396, 407, 446). Even among the modern races, the Saxons are partially surpassed by others, for instance by the Slavonians in intellect (vi, 356).

The Saxons’ moral flaws include “hypocrisy and . . . selfishness” which “give . . . to Saxon war a vulgar, . . . mercenary spirit, cold and calculating. . . . The plains of Hindostan have been the grand field for Saxon plunder” (80). This temporary critique of overseas colonialism is offset by other passages which reassert the superiority of the European races and the historical necessity of imperialism, even though the moral legitimations of “civilizing
missions” are exposed as a sham masking material self-interest. Apart from hypocrisy and egotism, Knox identifies another moral flaw in the Saxons’ overinflated self-esteem (vi, 46, 59). Apparently referring to both confidence and greed for wealth, he warns the Saxons that “good when in excess become[s] . . . vices” (54). He asserts that the Saxon race is “of all others the most outrageously boasting, arrogant, self-sufficient beyond endurance, holding in utter contempt all other races and all other men” (131). His warnings that the Saxons, though admirable, are not as uniquely superior as they might think, refer not only to past and present racial rankings, but also to future developments—he comments “the theory that the Saxon race is the highest development” with the laconic words: “So would have reasoned the saurians” (466). He implies that the future may see the evolution of even more superior races, while the Saxons, despite their virtues and present global eminence, might ultimately be bound to disappear, just as Native American peoples were already disappearing before the encroachment of the “superior” Saxons in the nineteenth century, as Knox observed. Notably, Knox even admits the possibility that his ranking of the Saxons among the most superior races might be due to the fact that he is a Saxon himself and thus potentially biased (57).

Despite his acknowledgments of Saxon flaws and his own potential bias, he retains his belief in the Saxons’ overall superiority, if not in all, then at least in many respects—especially as some of their defects can be overcome, or at least sufficiently tempered. This belief in the possibility of education and racial improvement is formulated in his remarks on Saxon attitudes to warfare:

Soldiering they despise as being unworthy of free men: the difficulty of teaching them military discipline and tactics, arises from the awkwardness of their forms and slowness of movement, and from their inordinate self-esteem. But when disciplined, their infantry, owing to the strength of the men, becomes the first in the world. (59)

Ultimately the Saxons appear as the most superior of the existing white races. This is suggested by a passage which polarizes between the darkest “races” as the lowest ones in the global hierarchy, and the Saxons as the highest (449).

A not-quite-so-dark race which in Knox’s account often appears as a binary opposite to Saxondom is the Celtic one, which according to Knox occupies Ireland, Wales, Highland Scotland, the entirety of France, and the formerly French colony of Quebec. As with other races, their character appears unchanged by time, a claim substantiated by parallels between modern specimens and those described by writers from classical antiquity:

The true Celt: [neither] time nor circumstances have altered him from the remotest period, . . . that character . . . common to all the Celtic
race. . . . Civilization but modifies, education effects little; . . . his morals, actions, feelings, greatesses, and littlenesses, flow distinctly and surely from his physical structure; . . . [neither] climate, nor time, affect man, physically . . . [or] morally. Let the history of the Gauls speak for itself. (318–19)

Knox mentions not only Caesar’s account of the Gallic Wars, but also earlier Celtic attacks on Rome and Delphi. These episodes from antiquity are presented as evidence of traits which can still be discerned in modern Celts: “War and plunder, bloodshed and violence, [are the things] in which the race delights. . . . I do not blame them: I pretend not to censure any race: I merely state facts. . . . War is the game for which the Celt is made. Herein is the forte of his physical and moral character” (319). Knox praises the Celts’ “muscular energy and rapidity of action, surpassing all other European races” (320), and their related preeminence in military glory (26, 320–21, 330). This reflects that the major role allocated to Gaels in British national affairs since the late eighteenth century was soldiering. Like romantic Highlandism, Knox’s post-romantic racial assessment identifies the Celts’ prowess in war as one of their major assets. Another romantic trope in Knox’s racial typology is the notion that the Celts have an impulsive and emotional temper (267, 320) which gives them a special talent for literature, music, and art:

[The Celt is] an admirer of beauty of colour, and beauty of form, and therefore a liberal patron of the fine arts. Inventive, imaginative, he leads the fashions all over the civilized world. Most new inventions and discoveries in the arts may be traced to him; they are then appropriated by the Saxon race, who apply them to useful purposes. His taste is excellent, though in no way equal to the Italian. . . . The musical ear of the [Celtic] race is tolerably good; in literature and science, they follow method and order, and go up uniformly to a principle; [though] in the ordinary affairs of life, they despise order. (320, italics mine).

Although Knox does not explicitly link artistic and emotional leanings with femininity, the gendering of these traits was widespread enough to allow the assumption that an implication of femininity might also be picked up by many of Knox’s readers. This would, again, give the Celtic image a gender ambiguity which it already possessed during the romantic age: Knox as well gives the Celts both hypermasculine (warfare) and quasi-feminine attributes (emotion, art).

The Celts’ lack of order in everyday life is one of their major character flaws and stands in direct opposition to the Saxon capitalist work ethic. Divergence from Saxon capitalist values marks Celtic society as inferior: pre-1745 Scottish Highland life is denigrated as “a state of barbarism” (375),
while elsewhere Knox talks more generally of the “semi-barbarous modern Celt” (74–75). One of the chief Celtic vices is laziness:

The Saxon, to whom . . . labour is a natural instinct; him they [the Celts] look on as a mean-spirited, low-minded scoundrel, who would work the soul out of himself for a few shillings, instead of acting as they do—I mean . . . the Celt—never doing any labour which they can get another to do for them; thus living a fine, dashing, do-nothing life, like a true-born gentleman. (158–59, also see 18)

This presents Celtic commoners as presumptuously aspiring to the idle lifestyle and self-esteem of a gentlemanly rank to which they are, by Saxon standards, not entitled. This echoes eighteenth-century anglophone discourse on the undue arrogance and aristocratic ego of Highland tacksmen, who prided themselves on their political and social rank as relatives of the chieftain, members of the clan elite, and military commanders, while economically being much worse off than the Lowland or English gentry. More recent anti-Gaelic texts, that is, those relating to famine relief and the labor-for-food program, are echoed in Knox’s claim that “rather than labour, they would willingly starve” (158). Diligence is not the only aspect of capitalist work ethics and middle-class value systems which the Celts are supposed to lack: “they despise . . . economy, cleanliness; of to-morrow they take no thought” (320). The Celt is diagnosed as a “despiser of the peaceful arts, of labour, of order, and of the law” (322), having “no accumulative habits” (26), “no self-esteem, no confidence in [his] individual exertions” (330). The unprofitability of Celtic economy is blamed on flaws in their racial character: “you have no individual self-reliance, and so you divide and sub-divide, in the Irish cotter style, the bit patch of land left you by your forefathers, until your condition be scarcely superior to the hog who shares it with you” (330).

Lack of self-reliance is not only responsible for the Celts’ economic problems, but also for their political leanings, which are undemocratic, feudal, and absolutist, showing a yearning for strong, autocratic leaders, in binary opposition to Saxon democracy. Celtic undemocratic inclinations are associated with several systems and events which were, or had been, perceived as dangerous to the British mainstream. First, this echoes customary anglophone mainstream critiques of the despotic nature of the old clan system. Second, it reflects the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century association between Gaels and the absolutist leanings of the Stuart monarchs and their supporters. The Jacobite association might also underlie Knox’s assertion that the Celtic racial character shows “furious fanaticism; a love of war and disorder” (26). The fanaticism of Scott’s Flora Mac-Ivor likewise comes to mind. Apart from bygone Jacobitism, such Knoxian comments might, third, also reflect recent events in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland, whose growing nationalism appeared to Victorian English or anglophilic eyes as a major
threat. This preoccupation with the threat of Irish rebellion, and its explanation by reference to racial character rather than social factors, becomes more explicit when Knox attempts to substantiate his characterization of the Celts as “restless, treacherous, uncertain” by the remark “look at Ireland” (26, also see 320). A fourth threat to the British status quo which underlies Knox’s assessment of the Celtic political mindset is the string of French revolutions which had shaken Europe, most notably in 1789 and 1848: “to revolutionize is Celtic; to reform, Saxon” (329). This reflects widespread British pride in the stability and moderateness of their constitutional monarchy since the earlier revolutions of the seventeenth century, as opposed to the instability and radicalism of recent French politics.

This association of the Celtic “race” with a precapitalist economy and an absolutist social order long superseded by Britain’s Saxon mainstream accords with Knox’s presentation of the Celts as a backward-looking people more preoccupied with the past than with the present or future: “Children of the mist, even in the clear and broad sunshine of day, they dream of the past: nature’s antiquaries” (322, also see 320). This is another romantic trope which now hardens into racial typology. It also ties in with Knox’s idea that the Celts are doomed to decline—another parallel to romantic Ossianism: “the Caledonian Celtic race . . . fell at Culloden, never more to rise; the Boyne was the Waterloo of Celtic Ireland” (15). Among the various sub-segments of the Celtic race, the Gaels seem especially liable to Celtic gloom:

Looking on the darkening future, which they cannot, try not, to scan, . . . gaunt famine behind them, no hopes of to-morrow, cast loose from the miserable patch he held from his ancestry, the dreamy Celt, the seer of second sight, still clinging to the past, exclaims at his parting moment from the horrid lands of his birth, “We’ll maybe return to Lochaber no more.”

And why should you return . . . to the dark and filthy hovel you never sought to purify? to the scanty patch of ground on which you vegetated? Is this civilization? . . . Chroniclers of events blame your religion: it is your race. Why cling to the patch of ground with such pertinacity? I will tell you: you have no self-confidence, no innate courage, to meet the forest or the desert; without a leader, you feel . . . lost. It is not the land you value as land, for you are the worst of agriculturists; but on this spot you think you may rest and have refuge. Now look at the self-confident Saxon. . . . Does he fear to quit the land of his birth? Not in the least; . . . he becomes a real American . . . a native Tasmanian, Australian; . . . he has forgot . . . the land of his forefathers. . . . [Showing] his go-ahead principles . . . he plunges into the forest; boldly ventures on the prairie; fears no labour—that is the point; loves that which you most abhor—profitable labour. . . . With him all is order, wealth, comfort; with you reign
disorder, riot, destruction. (322–24, first italics mine, subsequent ones original)

The Celt looks ever backward, the Saxon ever forward. As binary opposites, these two “races” are claimed to be incapable of intermixing. Hybridization, mutual influence, and change of mentality are deemed impossible and cannot be effected in any imaginable way, whether by education, interbreeding, or migration:

700 years of absolute possession has not advanced by a single step the amalgamation of the Irish Celt with the Saxon English: the Cym- bri of Wales remain as they were: the Caledonian still lingers in diminished numbers, but unaltered, on the wild shores of his lochs and friths, scraping a miserable subsistence from the narrow patch of soil left him by the stern climate of his native land. Transplant him to another climate, a brighter sky, a greater field, free from the . . . routine of European civilization; carry him to Canada, be is still the same. (18, Knox’s italics)

[L]e bas Canadian, is a being of the age of Louis Quatorze. Seigno- ries, monkeries, Jesuits, grand domains; idleness, indolence, slavery; a mental slavery, the most dreadful of all human conditions. See him cling to the banks of rivers, fearing to plunge into the forest; without self-reliance; without self-confidence. If you seek an explanation, go back to France; go back to Ireland, and you will find it there: it is the race. (18)

Climate has no influence in permanently altering the . . . races . . . it cannot convert them into any other race; nor can this be done even by act of parliament. . . . It has been tried in Wales, in Ireland, in Caledonia—and failed. . . . [Another] gentleman . . . maintained, that we had forced Saxon laws upon the Irish too hurriedly; that we had not given them time enough to become good Saxons, into which they would be metamorphosed at last. In what time . . . do you expect this . . . change? The experiment has been going on already for 700 years; I will concede you seven times 700 more, but this will not alter the Celt: no more will it change the Saxon. (53, also see 68–69, 137–38)

Elsewhere, Knox claims that a durable hybrid race is just as impossible to produce through intermixture between Saxons and Celts as it is through intermixture between Saxons and Africans (88).

However, all these attempts to cast the Celts as a diametrically opposed Other to a frequently superior Saxon norm do not tell the whole story. Even
such a master of categorization as Knox finds himself faced with the problem that the Celts are in many ways too obviously “Same,” too European, to be easily subsumed under his racial dichotomies. In *The Races of Men*, this ambiguity surfaces in several respects, notably in Knox’s account of ancient history and his uneasy attempts to grapple with intra-Celtic heterogeneity, for instance between powerful modern France and destitute insular Gaels, or between Catholics and Protestants.

Knox is another patriot who proudly places his own nation’s role as a modern center of world civilization in the illustrious tradition of ancient Greek and Roman precedents. He even claims that those Greek and Roman achievements were largely owed to a temporary admixture of northern European blood (47, 397–404, 407). This racial commonality between ancient and modern civilizational centers can, according to Knox, still be discerned in physical similarities between the modern English population and the people portrayed in classical art (403). While many other texts connect this alignment between modern England and ancient Greece or Rome with a denigration of past and present “Celts” as barbarian Others, Knox’s book takes a different turn. The Celts’ long-standing in-betweenness as both Other and Same is reflected in the fact that *The Races of Men* positions at least the ancient Celts not among the Greeks’ and Romans’ barbarian inferiors, but within the classical center, as another superior northern race that, along with the Saxons, temporarily infused the ancient Mediterranean world with blood and perfection:

To the Scandinavian . . . Greece owed her grandeur of forms, especially in woman; . . . common sense, mechanical genius, large-limbed men, athletae, matchless perseverance. To the admixture of Celtic blood may be traced her warlike disposition, energy, vivacity, wit; and to Slavonian and Gothic we must trace . . . the transcendental qualities of her philosophy and morals; the substratum was an Oriental mind. (404, also see 400–401)

A similar positioning of Celts between barbarism and civilization can be discerned in Knox’s struggle with the definitional problems arising from his attempt to claim Celtic racial unity from France to Ireland, while recognizing a striking difference in power, polish, and prestige between the subaltern Celts of the British Isles and their far more elegant, respected, and modern cousins on the Continent: “France; a Celtic race, . . . the most highly civilized people on the earth” (128). France’s status is recognized in Knox’s allusion to her former power during the Hunnish and Ottoman invasions (321), and more recently in the Napoleonic era when French Celts and “Sarmatian” Russians had been “the two dominant races of Europe” (60, Knox’s italics). While he recognizes the “disaster of 1815” as a potentially irredeemable reduction of status (15), he considers even the diminished France of his own
day as a representative of great civilization and “the dominant race of the earth” (321). Whereas he usually portrays Celts (especially insular ones) as a race in decline, for France he envisions a successful future as a major power both in Europe (321) and in overseas colonialism (e.g., 246, 268). He lists the French among the major colonialists of the future—at least as far as colonialism can, in Knox’s view, be successful at all. This runs counter to his portrait of insular Celts as fit for no more than becoming colonized themselves.

The ambivalent position of the Celts as occupying both the lowest and the highest levels of civilization is explicitly acknowledged: “The Celtic race presents the two extremes of what is called civilized man; in Paris we find the one; in Ireland, . . . the other” (324). The great discrepancies in lifestyle and prestige between rural Ireland and urban France make it difficult to subsume both under the same racial denominator. Faced with this quandary, Knox searches for an explanation which will allow him to retain his racialist dogmas. And at least in one field he seems to have found such an explanation—the field of literature. While Celts and their literature are generally considered to be innately primitive, the French are an exception because they have profited from classical Mediterranean influences: “As a race, the Celt has no literature, nor any printed books in his original language. Celtic Wales, Ireland, and Scotland are profoundly ignorant. There never was any Celtic literature, nor science, nor arts: these the modern French Celt has borrowed from the Roman and Greek” (325). Knox seems aware that this maneuvers him into a paradox: suggesting a profound foreign influence in this particular field (literature) contradicts his general dogma of immutable racial traits. The latter, consequently, must be immediately reasserted, but again Knox’s formulation reflects his struggle with the contradiction between undeniable polish on the one hand and an assumed sameness of French and Irish people on the other: “French literature . . . is of the highest order, and, to a certain extent, . . . deeply influenced by, the race” (325, italics mine). In a way, these internal ambiguities within Knox’s book reflect a wider split in nineteenth-century anthropological discourse between those who believed that racial difference might only be valid for certain periods, after which they could change, and those who believed in the permanence of difference.

A second difficulty which France’s civilizational eminence poses to Knox’s theorizing concerns the hierarchization of Celts and Saxons. He usually asserts Saxon superiority over the Celt in most walks of life. France, however, threatens his Saxon superiority complex: Knox presently finds himself unable to name a society which is more polished than that of Paris (324–25). He might hope that the Saxons will in time rise to the racial challenge to surpass the Celts even there. In the meantime, he seems relieved that Saxon superiority can at least be asserted in some other area of contemporary life: “Paris is the centre of the fashionable, the civilized world; always in advance, in literature, science, and the fine arts. . . . Even in ship building they transcend all other races; but they cannot man them; they are no sailors” (326, also see
472). The Saxons, by contrast, are born to sail the seas: “The proper field for action of the Saxon is the ocean” (472).

Another field where intra-Celtic heterogeneity threatens to destabilize the dogma of unalterable racial distinctness and unity is religion: for Knox, the Celtic character is essentially opposed to the Reformation (3–4), which runs counter to the fact that “the Caledonian Celt is an Evangelical Protestant, and so also is the . . . Welsh” (69). This not only undermines appearances of racial unity, but could also be interpreted as an instance where historical developments have at least partly obliterated the boundaries between religiously reformed Celts and likewise Protestant Saxons. Again, Knox counters such definitional insecurities by tenaciously reasserting that—despite apparent destabilizations of racial identity on the surface—the underlying essence of Celticity remains unaltered:

Is the [Protestant] Caledonian Celt better off than the [Catholic] Hibernian? is he more industrious? more orderly, cleanly, temperate? has he accumulated wealth? does he look forward to to-morrow? Though a seeming Protestant, can you compare his religious formula with the Saxon? It is the race, then, and not the religion; that elastic robe, modern Christianity, adapts itself . . . to all races and nations. It has little or no influence . . . over human affairs. . . . The . . . broad principles of the morality of man have nothing to do with any religion. The races of men still remain distinct. (69)

That is, where the doctrine of racial unity and distinctness seems to be contradicted by facts, Knox asserts the superiority of his dogma through a suitable reinterpretation of these facts: “All over the world the Celtic race is, properly speaking, Catholic, even when not Roman. . . . The reformed Celts have never joined the churches ‘as by law established’ ” (327). The latter refers to the fact that Welsh and Highland Scottish Protestantism had largely taken a form which differed from the national Protestant churches of England and Scotland, both of which were an official part of the state establishment. The nineteenth-century Highlands were dominated by an evangelical movement which in 1843 had seceded from the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church; while Wales was a stronghold of Methodism. For Knox, this intra-Protestant divergence from English or Lowland Scottish norms is enough to justify a classification of the Welsh and the Gaels as essentially Catholic—although in reality the dissenting Protestant churches were arguably much further removed from Catholicism than the national churches of Scotland and England were.

Thus reasserted, the immutability of racial character and the impermeability of racial boundaries pose practical political questions: different races can never coexist peacefully within the same state. Knox considers national and state collectives as artificial constructs:
Empires, monarchies, nations, are human contrivances; often held together by fraud and violence. (4)

We call the Celtic Welsh, Irish, and Highland Scotch, Britons; citizens of Britain; and sometimes, which is most amusing, Englishmen! The same legal fiction extends to India, as the . . . Mauritanian inhabitants of Northern Africa were called Roman citizens! (309)

Although it is possible to form multiethnic/multiracial nations and empires, their artificiality means that they cannot survive, as the purity of races will naturally reassert itself (109) and may result in intra-national strife: “Woe to the empire or nation composed . . . of different races . . . ! Let Ireland teach the incredulous” (292). In Knox’s eyes, the rebellious tendencies in Ireland are not attributable to the smallness of agricultural holdings or other social factors, but to a biological reason: the untenability of racial coexistence, which sooner or later must end in a “war of race.” Similarly, he describes eighteenth-century Jacobitism not as a result of clashing political or economic interests, but as a racial conflict (15). Racial war, he asserts, will always end with the victory of one race over the other; and in confrontations between Celts and Saxons, the Saxons are invariably destined to win. While Knox might not envisage a Saxon invasion of France, for the British spheres of interest in Canada and the British Isles he prophesies a complete Saxon victory and declares the subjugation, displacement, or even extermination of the inferior Celtic race to be justified. One way of justifying such conquests is the assertion that the Celts are incapable of making efficient use of the land they hold: “Ireland, Caledonia, are even yet in the hands of the Celtic race—hence their terrible condition” (390, also see 402). Thus, their expropriation by a stronger, more competent race is required on economic grounds.56

[A] portion of a Celtic race from France seized on a part of Canada; . . . they carried with them the Celtic character . . . their natural indolence . . . ; their habits of clinging to each other and leaving the country desolate; they huddled themselves in villages, seemingly terrified to locate in the open country; they had no self-dependence, no go-ahead notions; and so they all but stood still. . . . Then poured in the Saxon upon them; seized their territory, and advised them to become English. With this seemingly quite reasonable request they refused compliance; hence the revolts—hence the attempts to re-establish Celtic authority in Canada. This struggle can only cease when the Saxon has become the preponderating race in Lower Canada. . . . [We] have the same effect . . . in Ireland: Canada is merely a western Ireland and Wales; the inextinguishable hatred of races is in full play; unite they never will; one must become extinct. Now it is easy to see which goes first to the wall; . . . the Saxon steps in with his
self-dependent, go-ahead principle; then flourish commerce, manufacture, agriculture, and every useful speculation; then will Ireland become Saxon. . . . So will “Le bas Canada,” . . . soon, under such circumstances, cease to be Celtic. (263–66)

Culloden decided the fate, not of Scotland, . . . but of the Caledonian Celt: the Lowland Saxon Scotch took part against them: Celtic Ireland fell at the Boyne. . . . Sir Robert Peel’s Encumbered Estate Bill aims simply at the quiet and gradual extinction of the Celtic race in Ireland . . . , and it will prove successful. A similar bill . . . for Caledonia . . . may be required shortly: the Celtic race cannot too soon escape from under Saxon rule. As a Saxon, I abhor all dynasties, monarchies and bayonet governments, but this latter seems to be the only one suitable for the Celtic man. (26–27, also see 266–67)

The really momentous question for England, as a nation, is the presence of three sections of the Celtic race still on her soil: the Caledonian or Gael; the . . . Welsh; and the Irish . . . ; and how to dispose of them. The Caledonian Celt touches the end of his career: they are reduced to about one hundred and fifty thousand; the Welsh Celts are not troublesome, but may easily become so; the Irish Celt is the most to be dreaded. . . . The race must be forced from the soil; by fair means, if possible; still they must leave. England’s safety requires it. I speak not of the justice of the cause; nations must ever act as Machiavelli advised. (378–79, author’s italics)

Knox probably does not mean to advocate direct slaughter: his condemnation of genocide in Tasmania as “a cruel, cold-blooded, heartless deed” (145) suggests that he considers open massacre as overly cruel. However, another way of attaining similar results—ridding a desirable territory of an inconvenient native population—would be to let people die by slow starvation and then blame it on their own indolence. Knox’s comments on Celtic laziness and land use suggest that he deems the latter strategy more acceptable.57

For the future, Knox envisages an Ireland which by the mid-twentieth century will be entirely settled by Saxons (379). This proposed policy of more thoroughly colonizing and exterminating Britain’s “Celtic fringe” populations is clearly considered as a parallel to the development of overseas colonies, whose indigenous peoples were already receiving similar treatment.58 This parallel between domestic and overseas colonization becomes explicit in another formulation of Knox’s vision for Ireland:

Sell the island to Saxon men. It is a powerful measure. It has succeeded seemingly against some of the dark races of men, whom it has brought to the verge of destruction. Caffre and Hottentot, Tasmanian
and American: why not against a fair race—the Celtic natives of Ireland, Wales, and Caledonia . . . ? . . . Placed front to front, antagonistic . . . with a stronger race, our reason . . . might hastily decide in foretelling their extermination. (78)

While the words “seemingly” and “hastily” might indicate skepticism about the feasibility of this vision, the previously quoted passages on Ireland’s future do not seem to leave room for such doubts. With regard to indigenous populations of overseas colonies—much more obviously “other” than the Celts, for example in skin color—such a policy of extermination was often much more advanced than on the Celtic fringe. Moreover, European mainstream opinion often deemed such ruthless action more acceptable in an overseas context than in a domestic, Celtic one. Apparently, Knox’s strategy of drawing parallels between Celts and overseas colonized peoples of darker “races” aims to defuse the scruples which hindered the application of extermination policies to Celtic areas. One of the dark-skinned “races” invoked for comparison with Celtic subject peoples are the East Indians: “Ireland . . . is no [settler] colony as yet: it is . . . merely a country held by force of arms, like India; a country inhabited by another race” (374–75).

The Races of Men also contains an illustration showing a “Celtic group” of characters with features that evoke stereotypical portrayals of Africans, such as curly and closely-cropped hair, a flat nose, full lips, and even a dark complexion (52). The darkness of complexion is partly rendered artistically plausible by the faces (or parts of them) being in the shadow, which means a merely temporal darkness. But this portrait also evokes the more permanent darkness of African people’s skin, an association reinforced by African-style curls and facial features. Proximity between Celts and “darker races” is also implied in Knox’s claim that Celtic French-Canadians are “amalgamating readily with the Red Indian by intermarriage, (for the Celt has not that antipathy to the dark races which . . . characterizes the Saxon)” (74–75).

Not only are some non-European “races” said to be equally flawed as the Celts, but some of them are even deemed superior to the Celts in certain respects. Knox respects the work ethic of Muslim Moors and regrets that southern France no longer has a “Moorish population” because the latter would have been “an active, energetic, industrious body of artizans” “superior in all respects to the lazy, worthless Celt” (337).

At times, comparisons with overseas colonies even suggest that the Celtic “colonies” within the British Isles might be the only colonial projects which are really feasible. Knox is very skeptical about the possibility of sustaining overseas colonialism over a longer period, for reasons which partly lie in climate and partly in racial character. In the tropics there can be no proper settler colonialism because white people’s bodies cannot adapt to those climes, so that European control can only be maintained through an ever-fresh influx of new, still healthy people from the mother country. Such places can only be
held as zones of military occupation, with a minority of whites ruling “as mil-
itary masters . . . over a slave population” (291), but not as settler colonies. Even military occupation is not universally possible on a long-term basis. Places like India might be occupied with relative ease because Asians seem comparatively unthreatening. But certain black populations in Africa or the Caribbean can at most be brought to a temporary retreat: they will then flee into the jungle, where the Europeans cannot follow them because the white races are not adapted to its conditions. Thus, the jungle provides a refuge for black people in which they can recover before setting out to reconquer the land for their own race.

In the more moderate climes of North America or parts of Australia, settler colonies do seem possible in Knox’s eyes, but he thinks that even in these regions British colonies cannot be retained for long because of the nature of the Saxon race, to which most settlers belong: since Saxons love independence, they easily split into small factions, so that the Saxon overseas settlers will ultimately secede from the mother country. Moreover, even in those temperate overseas climes, the Saxon race cannot really flourish:

No existing race is equal to the colonization of the whole earth. . . . Already the Anglo-Saxon rears with difficulty his offspring in Austra-
lia: it is the same in most parts of America. But for the supplies they receive from Europe the race would perish, even in these most healthy climates. (471)

The Saxon . . . race cannot domineer over the earth—cannot even exist permanently on any continent to which he is not indigenous—
cannot ever become native, true-born Americans—cannot hold in permanency any portion of any continent but the one on which he first originated. (vi, Knox’s italics)

Even the moderate climatic difference of the Mediterranean makes permanent Saxon settlement impossible (47, 131–32). The only territories which might allow enduring Saxon colonization seem to be the Celtic fringes of the British Isles, whose climate is sufficiently similar to the English one. The geographical proximity of the Celtic areas to England, which in some people’s eyes has precluded their inclusion in the category “colony” (or “postcolonial”), does in Knox’s eyes make the Celtic fringes the only viable colonies that Britain may ever have. And even that is uncertain, at least as regards the retention of the successfully saxonized territories in British possession: “a hundred years hence, . . . a Saxon population in Ireland will . . . forget that they ever came from England. . . . Then come the struggle of self; the Saxon against Saxon.”

Despite these insecurities, Knox’s racial theories about Celts and Saxons allow considerable space for justifying the internally colonial marginaliza-
tion and expropriation of Celtic populations by dint of biologically ingrained
mentalities and hierarchies. Knox provides one of the most important anthropological accounts which apply scientific race theory to intra-British cultural distinctions. Despite precursors like Pinkerton, Walker, and certain journalists, Knox considered his own proposition of intra-European racial divisions as a pioneer project. In subsequent decades, the concept of intra-European racial differences gained increasing acceptance in professional anthropology. While Knox’s book had attempted to sort the entire human species into categories, the major work of his younger Welsh-English colleague John Beddoe focused exclusively on *The Races of Britain*.

At times, Lowland Scots even claimed that their own racial inheritance was more purely Teutonic than that of the English. This might reflect anxiety that Scotland’s frequent association with Gaelic-based national symbols placed a Celtic taint on the nation that signaled the admixture of inferior racial stock. Such a taint might threaten Lowland Scottish ambitions for parity with hegemonic England, and pull them back toward the barbarism they had struggled so long to escape. As a counterreaction, it might have seemed safer not just to claim parity with, but even superiority to, the English, by claiming ultra-pure hyper-Saxonness.

Anthropology, history, and anti-Celtic popular opinion were not the only fields which became permeated by racialist theories. Depictions of Celts as a separate racial entity can also be found in cultural criticism, creative writing, and even among the works of intellectuals of the Gaelic revival. Even those whose opinions were not anti- but rather pro-Celtic frequently believed in the typologies which anthropologists had done so much to solidify and propagate. Only the evaluation of the Celts’ alleged racial characteristics changed, from a largely negative to a largely positive verdict—as the following chapter testifies.