Gaelic Scotland in the Colonial Imagination

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Chapter 6

Racist Reversals

Appropriating Racial Typology in Late Nineteenth-Century Pro-Gaelic Discourse

There were various reasons why, during the second half of the nineteenth century, a more sympathetic outlook on the Celtic Other again appeared more widely tolerable. Several of these reasons resembled the factors which had been responsible for earlier romanticizations of Gaelic noble savagery in the romantic period: capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, rural depopulation, overseas emigration, and mass pauperism not only persisted, but had greatly intensified, and still created longings for actually or supposedly more traditional, rural, slow-paced, socially cohesive, and humane ways of life. Again, this longing often took the form of ideological compensation and temporary escapism rather than practical initiatives for radical social change. Romanticized Celtic noble savagery could still be an attractive focus for compensatory and escapist fantasies, provided that they posed no practical threat to the modern British, anglocentric status quo. What had, since the romantic period, sometimes militated against such idealizations of Celticity was the anxiety that they might still jeopardize the status quo, for example, by becoming so fashionable that they might overshadow Lowland Scots culture, or by proving incapable of long-term economic improvement. Those who did feel such anxieties may have been more inclined to return to older notions of Celtic ignoble savagery, now propped up by modern concepts of immutable racial essences which suggested the fruitless of improvement efforts and justified harsh policies through ideas of natural hierarchy and race decline. However, even at the height of anti-Celtic racism, not everyone seemed to feel sufficiently threatened or unsympathetic to subscribe to those notions. Romanticization and sympathy remained alternative options throughout. But they seemed to become more widespread when sociocultural developments of the second half of the nineteenth century proved previous anxieties to be unfounded. For example, after the Great Famine the Highland economy showed a modest degree of recovery which restored some mainstream onlookers’ belief in
improvement, though this may have been mainly based on landlords’ profits, not on the life situations of lower-class Gaels, which often remained dire. Further clearances had moved many more Gaels into “useful occupations,” whether in their home districts or—often more likely—in Britain’s growing cities and overseas colonies. Formal education, which also spread the English language, was progressing as well. Hence, it may have seemed that the Other was now truly contained, and thus safe to romanticize in non-subversive frameworks.

But there were also more subversive elements. One of these was the land agitation movement, which lasted, with intermissions and varying intensity, from the 1880s to the early twentieth century, and which has been considered the biggest political crisis in the Highlands since the end of Jacobitism. The main demand was for more land, fair rents, and secure tenure. The movement linked grassroots activism in the rural Gaidhealtachd with sympathetic newspapers and journals, the urban Gaelic scene, certain anglophone intellectuals, and a number of politicians. Several, though by no means all, Scottish land rights campaigners declared their solidarity with the Irish land agitators and with Irish Home Rule. Irish nationalist politicians in turn supported Highland crofting demands because they perceived analogies between their respective situations. But there are also important differences between the Scottish land agitation on the one hand and Irish or overseas anticolonial movements on the other. One of these differences lies in the fact that the Scottish Highland agenda aimed mainly for social reform and economic change, without drawing the conclusion that many foreign anticolonial resistance fighters drew, that is, that social and economic change could only be achieved through nationalism. Although Scottish Gaels at times harbored anti-English or anti-Lowland sentiments, they never developed a secessionist nationalism aiming to establish the Highlands and the islands off the west coast as an independent Gaelic nation state. Neither did they develop any notable agitation for an independent re-gaelicized Scotland.

In terms of mainstream opinion, one important effect of the land agitation was that it brought the harshness of Highland “modernization” to the attention of a wider public: “Lowland consciousness of the injustice inflicted for a century on their compatriots was the highest it had ever been.” Even among members of the mainstream who were not directly connected with the movement, increased public knowledge of the extent of Highland suffering created a greater readiness to sympathize with the Gaelic Other. Many seemed to think that, although the Gaels’ social traditions and language were still doomed to disappear, the tragedy might at least be alleviated by compassion and understanding, easing the culture’s death by the palliative medicine of kindness rather than envisioning immediate violent cultural execution. The continued attractiveness of romantic “dying race” tropes also fits into this framework: insisting that Celtic culture was indeed about to die could relieve any remaining anxieties about the subversive potential of the land
agitation or cultural revivalism, while the sentimental treatment of this death asserted the mainstream’s essential benevolence and alleviated any potential sense of guilt which the internal colonizers might have felt.

These kinds of romantic motivations—fantasy escapes from capitalism, alleviating guilt, and so on—may have been found among both Scottish and English people. Perhaps the most influential of the anglophone mainstream intellectuals who now sported an interest in Celtic culture was the English writer and cultural critic Matthew Arnold. While a detailed analysis of his work lies outside the scotocentric scope of the present study, he must briefly be noted as a major influence on some of the Scottish texts discussed here. His book *On the Study of Celtic Literature* sees the Saxon or Germanic race as practical, good-natured, steady, and reasonable, but also somewhat dull and philistine. The Celtic character is the opposite: emotional, impulsive, spiritual, sensitive to beauty and nature, but also irrational and inefficient. Despite Arnold’s belief in racial intermixture, these essentialist attributions are largely unchallenged. A colonizing impetus is also evident in his insistence that Saxons are the superior element in the United Kingdom’s national mix: Celts are a feminized, dying race, without autonomous linguistic or political futures, only acceptable as harmless folklore, museum pieces, and ennobling intellectual/artistic trace elements in anglophone culture. Conquest is deemed inevitable, but should be made more palatable by benevolence. Arnold had a wide-ranging impact, for instance on anglophone literary criticism, the late nineteenth-century “Celtic Renaissance”/“Celtic Twilight” in anglophone Irish and Scottish literature, and in the development of Celtic studies as an academic discipline.

For Scottish intellectuals, (re-)romanticizing the Celt could also hold another attraction, in addition to the ones already mentioned. This additional motivation lay in Scottish cultural patriotism. As in the romantic period, Victorian Scottish patriotism often remained confined to the cultural sphere, without any significant political aspirations, as unionism still dominated the zeitgeist, partly due to the rewards offered by Britain’s overseas empire. Thus, endorsements of Scottish cultural autonomy could again have a merely compensatory function. But to some extent, Victorian Scotland also showed tendencies toward a more political nationalism, especially in the Home Rule movement. Again, this was partly inspired by Irish initiatives. Political nationalism could also be linked to elements of the wider Scottish national resurgence which was evident in the cultural sphere. Examples of this cultural resurgence from the 1880s include important new collections of folk songs, as well as the foundation of significant cultural institutions like the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, the Scottish Text Society, and the Scottish Historical Society. A reassertion of autonomous national values in Scottish historical discourse had become tangible even earlier. This also had an impact on the way in which historians perceived the position of Gaelic tradition within Scotland’s national history. As a mark of Scottish distinctness
from England, the Gaelic heritage had often been downplayed by unionists. Despite the Teutonists’ urge to de-gaelicize Scottish history, other nineteenth-century historians were willing to acknowledge the Gaelic element, although the latter’s Irish roots were still frequently played down. Celticist fashions in Scottish literature can likewise be seen as part of a wider, pan-Scottish assertion of cultural autonomy and confidence.

The Celtic Renaissance which appeared on the horizon of the late Victorian anglophone literary scene spanned both Ireland and Scotland. In certain respects the Irish Celtic revival seems to have been an inspiration for the Scottish scene, and several contacts and cross-fertilizations existed between the two. One aspect of this Celtic Renaissance was the Celtic Twilight, a mainly literary movement which displayed a deep interest in dreams and the unreal, as well as nostalgia for an idealized and allegedly more beautiful, brave, and poetic Celtic past. Their image of Celticity reflected the influence of Matthew Arnold and earlier romantic models like James Macpherson’s Ossian. Despite such fatalistic, romantic, and escapist tendencies, the Celtic Renaissance in Ireland also had connections to the nationalist movement, as nostalgia for the past could be associated with an indictment of British hegemony as a culprit for the decline of indigenous Celtic culture. In Scotland, the Celtic Renaissance was considerably less radical than its Irish counterpart, both linguistically and politically.

In addition to such appropriations by a non-Gaelic mainstream, there was also a resurgence of interest in Gaelic tradition among Gaelic speakers themselves. Both Scotland and Ireland developed a Gaelic revival movement. Many Scottish Gaelic revivalists were educated middle- or upper-class Highlanders based in the Lowlands or England, or people from non-Gaelic backgrounds who had learned the language out of antiquarian, folkloristic, or political interests. A lot of them lived in an urban environment. Scotland’s landed aristocracy also played an important role in the revival, just as it had done earlier in the Highland Societies. New cultural associations were founded to promote the Gaelic language and Gaelic culture, such as the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1871 and An Comunn Gaidhealach in 1891. There was also an interest in Gaelic cultural festivals; the first National Mòd was held in 1892. These developments were paralleled by a vogue for linguistic scholarship, for collecting and publishing Gaelic folklore, and for the academic study of Gaelic history and literature. Antiquarian interests often reflected a desire to write back against mainstream anti-Celticism and against indigenous cultural cringes by rehabilitating Gaelic culture and enhancing indigenous self-confidence. For instance, the folklorist Alexander Nicolson wrote back to charges of savagery by drawing attention to cultural and moral achievements which, in his view, showed that the Gaels were at least on a par with other “civilized” cultures, if not even superior. Attempts to rehabilitate the Gaelic heritage often entailed a relatively uncritical, idealizing stance toward anything which could be labeled “traditional” or “indigenously
Gaelic.” Similar attempts to study, revalidate, and at times idealize indigenous traditions and precolonial histories have been discernible in early anti- and postcolonial nationalism overseas, for instance in Africa. However, glorifications of the past are not exclusively colonial or postcolonial phenomena, as they also occur in other social contexts with a sense of historical disruption or trauma. Urban city-dwellers in industrial Western societies have since the late eighteenth century shown tendencies to romanticize country life. Similarly, capitalist Victorian England often glorified the precapitalist values and social practices of the Middle Ages.

Nineteenth-century Scottish Celtic revivals were largely confined to the cultural sphere; in Ireland they were strongly linked to political objectives. But even in Scotland there were occasional, though less aggressive, political connotations, for example in Alexander Carmichael’s hope that the rehabilitation of indigenous culture might move the colonizer to grant political concessions, and that his vast collection of Gaelic folk traditions “might perhaps be the means of conciliating some future politician in favour of our dear Highland people.” Similar hopes were entertained by some anticolonial intellectuals in twentieth-century Africa, and were famously criticized by Frantz Fanon: “You do not show proof of your nation from its culture but . . . in the fight . . . against the forces of occupation. . . . You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little-known cultural treasures under its eyes.” Nonetheless, such cultural initiatives can indirectly contribute to current or future political struggles by promoting self-confidence.

Celtic “writing back” also adapted elements of colonial discourse for its own (at least partly subversive) purposes, parallel to similar appropriations in overseas anti- and postcolonialism. For instance, while Arnold’s colonizing perspective advocated the extinction of Celtic languages as living speech and only vindicated them as an antiquarian interest, some revivalists built on his foundations to campaign for the future survival of Celtic tongues, “seeking to de-Anglicise and . . . re-Celticize the Celtic countries.”

Not all these reassertions of Celtic, Scottish, and Gaelic cultural worth were articulated through concepts of race. There were also continuations of older traditions which merely operated in terms of ethnic or national, that is, sociocultural rather than biological, categories. But now that race discourse was available and widely accepted, it also frequently inflected and modified older concepts of ethnicity and nationhood. So, what may have been romanticized ethnic traits of Gaelic noble savagery in the later eighteenth century often became romanticized racial traits in the late nineteenth. While anti-Celtic authors were inclined to interpret wildness, irrationality, primitiveness, and other alleged Celtic traits as weaknesses, pro-Celtic supporters of race theory might have believed in the same racial traits, but gave them a more neutral or even positive evaluation, for instance as freedom of spirit or proof of the venerable antiquity of Celtic culture. To some extent,
this reevaluation of formerly negative anti-Celtic stereotyping in positive terms paralleled earlier shifts from Enlightened to romantic paradigms. It also anticipated positive reevaluations of formerly negative racial stereotypes which occurred in the black diaspora in the early and mid-twentieth century under the name of “negritude.” However, while negritude often allied itself to anticolonial projects, nineteenth-century Celtitude reimagined the Celtic “subject race” as a “master race” destined to share global imperial power with the Anglo-Saxons. The following pages offer case studies of racialist thinking in Scottish pro-Celtic anglophone fiction and scholarship.

Racial Typology in Anglophone Celticist Fiction: William Sharp / Fiona Macleod’s Novel Green Fire

William Sharp (1855–1905) was one of the most prominent representatives of the Celtic Twilight in the Scottish context. His relevance to the present study lies in the particularly lucid way in which he exemplifies how older tropes of romantic Celticism could survive throughout the entire nineteenth century while at the same time acquiring a new quality as they coexisted, and in some cases mingled, with the more recent developments of biologistic racism. Sharp, a scion of the Lowland Scottish middle class, lived mainly in and near London, was well-traveled in Europe and overseas, but also spent considerable time in Argyll and Edinburgh. A friend of William Butler Yeats, Sharp associated Celticity with sensitivity, mysticism, anti-Presbyterian sensuousness, antimagicalism, femininity, childhood, timelessness, an idealized golden age in the past, and a fated decline under the tragically irresistible onslaught of modernity. He had already worked as a journalist, editor, writer, and literary critic under his own name before he adopted an additional authorial identity under the female Gaelic pen name “Fiona Macleod” in 1894. Under this pseudonym, he wrote a number of works which were very popular at the time and included poems, novels, short stories, and drama. All these works were written in English.

His perception of Celticity as a tragically fated counter-construct to modernity is illustrated by the following passage:

In Wales, a great tradition survives; in Ireland, a supreme tradition fades through sunset-hued horizons to the edge o’ dark; in Celtic Scotland, a passionate regret, a despairing love and longing narrows yearly before a bastard utilitarianism which is almost as great a curse to our despoiled land as Calvinistic theology has been.

Terence Brown rightly points out that this perspective is reminiscent of Ossianism, for example in its romantic pathos and the nostalgic interpretation of modern Celticity as the declining remains of ancient greatness. The Ossianic connection is also illustrated by the fact that Sharp produced
a new edition of *The Poems of Ossian* in 1896. Matthew Arnold’s influence is evident in various explicit references in Sharp’s literary criticism. Further Arnoldian echoes appear in Sharp’s simultaneous racialization and gendering of Celtic Others. It seems no coincidence that Sharp’s Celtic pseudonym, whose alleged Highland and Gaelic-speaking identity is embodied in the surname Macleod, is feminine. As a woman, “Fiona” apparently seemed a more appropriate medium for the literary articulation of the spirit of a race whose impractical, dreamy, and irrational character was now commonly seen as feminine. A salient example of how the influences of various strands of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Celticism translate into “Macleod’s” fictional works is afforded by *Green Fire*, which brings out the racist elements of Sharp’s Celticism with particular lucidity.

The plot of this novel can be characterized as a romance with Gothic elements, embedded in the wider history of a pan-Celtic family. The initial scenes are set at a manor house in Brittany which is inhabited by the family of the Breton Marquis Tristran de Kerival and his estranged Gaelic-speaking wife Lois, who is originally a member of the Scottish Hebridean aristocracy. They have two grown-up daughters, the gentle and dreamy Ynys and the much wilder Annaik who spends much time outside in the forest and appears less good-natured, more violent-tempered, more hysterical, and more “barbaric” (*Green Fire* 264) than her sister (e.g., 31–33, 266). A fifth important family member is Alan, a young man who is the son of Lois’s dead sister Silis but has been adopted and raised by Lois and Tristran. At the beginning of the story, the identity of Alan’s father is still unknown to him. Alan and Ynys, who are deeply in love with each other, share a strongly Celtic consciousness and identity, manifest in their love for poetry, nature, romance, dreams, and gaelophone conversation. The first major turning point appears when Alan discloses his love for Ynys to her parents, who refuse their consent to the couple’s marriage. On the same day, Alan learns about the identity of his father—an impoverished minor Gaelic aristocrat called Alexander Carmichael—shortly after the latter has been killed by Tristran in a duel. Lois dies soon afterwards. Carmichael’s death and the marriage issue deepen the hatred between Tristran and Alan and prompt the latter to depart for his ancestral Scotland. Ynys accompanies him and becomes his wife. They set up house in a small castle, “not much more than a keep” (132), on the Isle of Rona which Alan has inherited from his Scottish forebears. The newlyweds hope to enjoy life in a Gaelic world which strongly appeals to their romantic sensibilities. But superstitious prophecies and mysterious happenings cast a shadow on their bliss: the islanders are suspicious of the couple because Alan or a mysterious doppelgänger of his has appeared to them in ominous visions, and several characters, including the two protagonists, encounter this doppelgänger in person. For a long time, they are unsure whether Alan’s double is a supernatural apparition or a living man. Sometimes this enigmatic stranger is associated with a more positive omen, that is, the notion
that Ynys might give birth to a child who will be the savior of the much-oppressed Gaelic race. Insecurities about the identity of the doppelgänger and about the question whether these contradictory portents bode well or not make the couple increasingly uneasy. Eventually, a natural explanation is found: Alan’s double is a long-lost cousin who once committed a murder that has condemned him to the life of an outcast hidden in the islands’ caves. Only his accidental death and the discovery of his corpse make it possible to solve the mysteries of most of the “visionary” sightings. The other mystery, the prophecy regarding Ynys’s child, turns out to be a hallucination caused by her overwrought nerves. The babe is stillborn, and eventually the couple returns to the happier shores of Brittany. As Tristran and Annaik have died in the meantime, Alan and Ynys inherit the family seat where they finally enjoy a happy life and have a new baby.

The racism which characterizes Sharp’s text is far less anti-Celtic than Knox’s—instead, it is ostensibly sympathetic, just as Arnold’s account had been.26 Another factor which distinguishes Sharp and Arnold from anthropologists like Knox is that the former are more exclusively preoccupied with spiritual markers of racial distinctness, while physical features such as skin and hair color appear less important. In Green Fire this becomes obvious in the considerable physical differences between the book’s various Celtic characters—while all of them are tall and graceful, their coloring varies: Ynys is dark-haired and suntanned, with greyish-green eyes (18–19); Annaik is pale, with reddish hair and “amber-brown eyes” (20); Alan has fair skin, “wavy brown hair,” and “grey-blue eyes” (50, also see 265). Racial unity is conveyed not so much through physical similarities as through shared intellectual and emotional preoccupations. Several of these allegedly typical Celtic preoccupations are familiar from Macpherson, other romantic authors, and Arnold. One of these is the supposed Celtic ability to unite sensuality with a more spiritual strain, as exemplified by Ynys: “a child of nature, a beautiful pagan, a daughter of the sun, . . . at once this and a soul alive with the spiritual life, intent upon the deep meanings lurking everywhere, wrought to wonder even by the common habitues of life, to mystery even by the familiar and the explicable” (57–58).27

Another feature of romantic and Arnoldian Celticism which resurfaces in Sharp’s novel as an inherited racial characteristic is the Celts’ alleged intimacy with nature.28 Ynys is associated with what the narrator calls the “sun-life,” which seems to mean a love of nature and the open air. The wording suggests that it is not a mere personal preference, but a racial inheritance:

She was of that small clan, the true daughters of the sun. . . . She loved the open air. . . . The sun-life was even in that shadowy hair of hers, which had a sheen of living light wrought into its . . . dusk: it was in her large, deep, translucent eyes, of a soft, dewy twilight-grey often filled with green light, as of the forest-aisles or as the heart of a
sea-wave . . .: it was in the heart and in the brain of this daughter of an ancient race—and the nostalgia of the green world was hers. For in her veins ran the blood not only of her Armorican ancestors, but of another Celtic strain— . . . the Gael of the Isles. (19)

Although “clan” might here be just a metaphor for “a group of humans,” without any specific reference to the Gaelic world in which the term was coined, this Gaelic context is present in the associative background of the metaphor, suggesting that “the sun-life” and a love for nature are found most often in people with Gaelic family connections. The biological factor becomes even clearer in the statement that “it was in the heart and in the brain of this daughter of an ancient race,” which implies that genetic racial inheritance determines a person’s thoughts and feelings. Celtic closeness to nature is further highlighted by the metaphors describing Ynys’s physique—metaphors which are all taken from the natural world: sunlight, sky, forest, sea. Similarly, the sound of Annaik singing Breton folk ballads is compared to “the strange . . . music of the forest-wind” (26). As “nature” often connotes the absence of restrictions associated with civilized human society, the closeness of the Celtic temperament to nature also implies particularly strong passions. The passionate Celtic temperament is again portrayed through nature imagery. Annaik’s eyes are described as “aflame with stormy light” (20), both fire and storm being powerful natural forces which are difficult or even impossible to control. Annaik’s uninhibited temperament is also expressed in the assertion that she possesses “an even wilder grace than Ynys” (20)—throughout the novel she appears even more passionate and Celtically hysterical than her sister, but the extremity of her wildness makes her more sinister and ultimately self-destructive.

Apart from closeness to nature, another romantic and Arnoldian feature of Sharp’s image of the Celtic race is the latter’s delight in poetry, romance, and history. Alan is described as follows: “His soul must have lived a thousand years ago. In him, at least, the old Celtic brain was reborn with a vivid intensity” (37). This suggests a continuity of intellect over a period of a thousand years, which can only be based on genetic inheritance.

However, the addition “at least” might imply that this racial inheritance does not surface with equal prominence in all Celts. This is confirmed through Tristran, whose disillusioned and dismissive comments about love, women, and marriage (62–63) make him much less romantic than his “racial” inheritance might lead one to expect. Another instance in Sharp’s novel which demonstrates that the call of racial inheritance can be overruled by individual emotion and personal choice is the reaction of Alan’s Hebridean servant to his master’s intention to elope with Ynys. At first, the servant argues that marrying the daughter of someone who has killed one’s father does not behove a Gael (151). Soon afterwards, however, he acquiesces out of personal sympathy: “It was against the tradition of his people; but he loved Ynys as well as
Alan, and secretly he was glad” (154). This decision to ignore racial tradition is apparently also approved by the narrator.

Alan and various other characters are, however, very strongly determined by racial inheritance. Alan is “ever occupied by that wonderful past of his race which was to him a living reality. . . . He turned . . . insatiably to the past with its deathless charm, its haunting appeal” (22). A teacher of his says that Alan “was born a thousand years too late” (22) and that his circle of friends consists of long-dead Celtic heroes and poets like “Taliéisin, Merlin, and Oisin” (22). These associations are elaborated as follows:

Alan’s mind was . . . irresistibly drawn to the Celtic world of the past. . . . In a word, he was not only a poet, but a Celtic poet; and . . . a dreamer of the Celtic dream.

Perhaps this was because of the double strain in his veins. Doubtless, too, it was . . . enhanced by his intimate knowledge of two . . . Celtic languages, that of the Breton and that of the Gael. . . . Language . . . is the surest stimulus to the remembering nerves. We have a memory within memory, as layers of skin underlie the epidermis. With most of us this anterior remembrance remains dormant throughout life; but to some are given swift ancestral recollections. Alan . . . was one of these few. (23)

“The double strain in his veins” presumably refers to his doubly Celtic inheritance of Breton and Gaelic elements. Of course, later it is revealed that the heritage in his veins, that is, his “blood” and genes, is not really double, as both his parents were Gaels. Strictly speaking, the doubleness is not in his veins but in his mind: the Breton element is based on a Breton upbringing, that is, socialization instead of biology. A conflict between biological and social explanations for cultural and territorial allegiances can also be discerned in Alan’s shifting notions of home: just before he leaves for Scotland, Alan calls Brittany “an alien land” (150). At first this seems odd, considering that he grew up there. The implication must be that the land feels alien to him because his genetic origin is entirely Gaelic. Interestingly, he feels the alienness of Brittany only after somebody has informed him of his father’s Scottishness. Thus, it is his intellect which dictates the instinct for home, which makes it no longer an instinct but a biologistic fiction. At the end of the book, Alan ceases to consider Brittany as alien and adopts it as his truest “home,” a term which is applied to Brittany three times on page 268 alone, and again on page 274. Thus, at least in some instances, Green Fire seems to acknowledge the superior importance of socialization over biology. But elsewhere in this novel, the predominance of biology remains unchallenged. The intensity of Alan’s “racial” memory, and the way it is described, clearly suggest a biological dimension—certain character traits and cultural knowledges seem hard-wired into his system by racial inheritance. For instance, we are told:
With this double [linguistic] key, Alan unlocked many doors. All the wonderful romance of old Armorica and of ancient Wales was familiar to him, and he was deeply versed in the still more wonderful and magical lore of the Gaelic race. In his brain ran ever that Ossianic tide which has borne so many marvellous argosies through the troubled waters of the modern mind. Old ballads of his native isles, with their haunting Gaelic rhythms and idioms, and their frequent reminiscences of the viking, were often in his ears. He had lived with Cuchullin and Oisin. He had watched the crann-tara flare from glen to glen, and at the bidding of that fiery cross he had seen the whirling of swords. He had followed Nial of the Nine Hostages, and heard Merlin and Taliesin speak of the secret things of the ancient wisdom.

All this marvellous life of old wrought upon Alan de Kerival’s life as by a spell. Often he recalled words of Gaelic which made a light shoreward eddy of the present, and were solemn with the deep-sea sound of the past that is with us even as we speak.

The notion that Ossianic literature bears “marvellous argosies” through troubled modern waters suggests that those remnants from the past are an enrichment of the modern world, although the latter continually besieges these traditions: the waters are “troubled,” which implies danger to the richly laden ships of Celtic heritage that travel these seas. Alan, and by extension his entire “race,” are portrayed as a repository of premodern historical and literary traditions, as living archives which preserve humanity’s past as a supplementary benefit for a modern world whose mainstream has long turned away from that heritage in favor of a more prosaic course. This does not mean that Alan is entirely backward-looking: he also enjoys the present and has hopes for the future, for instance regarding his love for Ynys (22). His poetic and romantic leanings are complemented by an interest and competence in science, although the latter is not as dear to him as poetry (36–37). However, the particular field of science he has chosen—astronomy—is a branch of rational inquiry which seems more congenial to the Celtic penchant for history and romance than other sciences: astronomy is described as “the science of the innumerous concourse of dead, dying, and flaming adolescent worlds” (37). In astronomy, this refers to the death and birth of stars, but it also has an earthly equivalent in Alan’s interest in dead or dying cultural or racial (Celtic) worlds. New stars born in the heavens are equivalent to new, progressive cultures or races that have gained ascendancy over the older, Celtic ones. Alan’s nocturnal sky- and stargazing as well as his Celtic propensity for dreams, mysteries, and “other worlds” are paralleled in Annaik and Ynys’s proneness to somnambulism. Annaik’s Celtic temper again takes a more uncontrolled and pathological form than her sister’s: while Ynys seems
to have been cured of her somnambulism, Annaik is not (83–84). Nonetheless, even Ynys’s Celtic sensibilities sometimes run out of control:

Sometimes, when she had sat in the twilight at Kerival . . . listening to tales of that remote North [Gaelic Scotland] to which her heart had ever yearned, she had suddenly lost all consciousness of the speaker, or of the things said, and had let her mind be taken captive by her uncontrolled imagination, till in spirit she was far away, and sojourned in strange places, hearing a language that she did not know, and yet which she understood, and dwelt in a past or a present which she had never seen and which yet was familiar. (210–11)

The unknown language heard in these visions can not be Gaelic, since that is a tongue she knows. It might be inferred that the voices belong to an even older insular culture, and that the racial memory or the racial imagination indeed reaches very far back.30 Another passage which suggests a particular connection between Celticity, dreaminess, unreality, and the past is a general narratorial comment on dreams: “What are dreams but the dust of way-faring thoughts? Or whence are they, and what air is upon their shadowy wings? Do they come out of the twilight of man’s mind: are they ghosts of exiles from vanished palaces of the brain . . . ?” (238, italics mine). On the surface this appears to be a general contemplation that is not limited to ethnic or racial particularities of the Celts. On a deeper level, however, it does suggest Celtic connections because the metaphors which here describe dreams are frequently applied to the Celtic spirit, both in this novel and elsewhere. Images of shadow and twilight often appear in the Celtic world of Green Fire. The image of exile recalls the real historical experience of Gaelic emigration which features more directly in other parts of this novel. The “vanished palaces” subtly reflect the historical decline of the Lordship of the Isles and Highland chieftainly feudalism, a decline which elsewhere in the book is more openly acknowledged. “Dust” evokes death, as corpses are commonly pictured as crumbling into dust, while “ghosts” are an even more direct reference to mortality. Such images of death echo the “dying race” trope which had so frequently been associated with Celticity ever since Macpherson’s Ossian.

Elsewhere, Sharp’s belief that the Celts are a dying race becomes even more explicit. His nonfictional works label the Celts as a “doomed and passing race,” for instance in the essay “Iona.”31 The label “passing race” reoccurs in the prefatory material to the novel Pharais and in his introduction to the anthology Lyra Celtica.32 Sharp’s assertion that, as “the Celt fades, . . . his spirit rises in the . . . Anglo-Celtic peoples, with whom are the destinies of the generation to come,” is again reminiscent of Matthew Arnold.33

In Green Fire, the association between Celticity, gloom, death, and twilight—a twilight so characteristic that it gave its name to an entire literary
Racist Reversals

movement—is also reflected in the description of Annaik’s eyes as “shadowy” (20), as well as of Ynys’s hair color as “dusk” and of her eyes as “twilight-grey” (19). Apart from reflecting the destiny of a dying race, the twilight metaphor also functions on an individual level, expressing a personal mood which appears especially preponderant in members of this race: a mood of gloom, metaphorically associated with the gloom of a dying day. Moreover, twilight imagery connotes a nocturnal darkness which threatens to obscure visual perception, and this impaired vision can be interpreted metaphorically as a general Celtic lack of conceptual clarity, as Celts had long been considered irrational. Further, the metaphor of impaired vision can be connected to a racial penchant for mystery. Another “typically Celtic” trait is passion, which is likewise associated with gloom, both in human moods and in the landscape. This becomes clear in the description of a journey made by an excited and worried Alan through stormy scenery: “Deep passion instinctively moves towards the shadow rather than towards the golden noons of light. . . Deep passion is always in love with death” (38). This is not the only passage where the gloominess of the Celtic soul and of Celtic racial destiny is mirrored in the gloominess of the Celtic landscape. The protagonists’ native part of Brittany is described as “an ancient land, with ever upon it the light of olden dreams, the gloom of indefatigable tragedy, the mystery of a destiny long ago begun and never fulfilled” (41). An equally significant feature of the Celtic landscape are the caves of Rona, described as an “obscure place” (250–51), “dim arcades” holding “secrets” (165), full of “deep gloom, . . . even on . . . [a] day of golden light and beauty . . . heavy with shadow . . . [and] a deathly chill” (245). Elsewhere, these caves are characterized as follows: “a pale green gloom, . . . dusky green obscurity, and some are at all times dark with a darkness that has seen neither sun, nor moon, nor star for unknown ages. . . Day and night, . . . from year to year, from age to age, that awful . . . darkness prevails unbroken” (165). This part of the Hebridean landscape is crucial to the plot: it is here that most of the apparitions and mysteries occur and are eventually solved. The gloom, timelessness, and mysteriousness of this central location mirror the gloom, timelessness, and mysteriousness of the Celtic racial soul.

Sharp’s racial typology is essentially pan-Celtic, as can be seen from Lois’s comments about her loveless marriage: “My husband and I had at least this to unite us: that we were both Celtic, and had all our racial sympathies in common” (136). However, there are important sub-distinctions: while in Knox’s and Arnold’s works the conflict between dreaminess and rationality, or tradition and modernity, is acted out between Celts and Teutons, in Sharp’s novel the Teutons do not feature at all, so that the contest between romance and reality is fought out on an intra-Celtic level. Sharp distinguishes between different kinds of Celts, suggesting that in some subvarieties the general Celtic tendencies for melancholy and mysticism come out even more prominently than in other subvarieties. There is a difference between p- and q-Celts: Brittany appears tendentially milder and more light-hearted than the gloomy
Gaidhealtachd, the latter being the region where Celtic racial traditions are preserved in the purest form. This distinction is suggested by a narratorial comment on Alan and Ynys which states that “the mysticism which was part of the spiritual inheritance come with . . . [their] northern strain was one of the deep bonds which united them” (58). The notion that mysticism and other “typical” Celtic traits are particularly strong in the Gaidhealtachd is also reflected in the following passage about Ynys:

Through her mother, Lois Macdonald, of the . . . Outer Hebrides, the daughter of a line as ancient as that of Tristran de Kerival, she inherited even more than her share of the gloom, the mystery, the sea-passion, the vivid oneness with nature which have disclosed to so many of her fellow-Celts secret sources of peace. (19)

While a basic love for nature and mystery might be common to all Celts, some Celts feel it more intensely than others, as the Gaelic line seems to bring out this tendency more strongly than the Breton one. This distinction, and the position of the Gaels as the most Celtic of Celts, is even clearer in the narrator’s assertion that Gaelic lore is “still more wonderful and magical” than that of Brittany and Wales (24).

Another important intra-Celtic distinction in Sharp’s novel is based on gender: Celtic women are even more susceptible to gloom, romance, and hysteria than Celtic men, which accords with Ernest Renan’s and Matthew Arnold’s tenet that Celticism and femininity share several mental characteristics, and that the Celts are thus a more feminine race than the rational and masculine Teutons. Sharp draws the logical conclusion that, while a general irrational strain is shared by all Celts, Celtic women must be doubly irrational and doubly dreamy: “If Alan were a dreamer, Ynys was even more so” (31). The importance of gender difference and the distinction between p- and q-Celts is also reflected in the fact that Ynys’s tendency for mysticism and brooding—strong from the outset even while she still dwells in Brittany—increases further during her stay in the Hebrides: “All that dreaming mysticism which had wrought so much of beauty and wonder into her girlhood in Brittany had expanded into a strange flower of the imagination . . . whose subtle fragrance affected her inward life” (234–35; also see 179, 210). One reason given for this intensification is her pregnancy (179, 211, 238, 241), that is, a specifically female state, which reinforces the impression that general Celtic traits of gloom and irrationality are even stronger in the female part of the Celtic population. A second reason for the increase in her gloominess and wild imaginings lies in the landscape: “the melancholy of the isles” (179). This again implies that the Gaidhealtachd is the most Celtic of all Celtic regions and brings out general racial tendencies even more strongly. These tendencies include not only a penchant for lonely brooding and flights of fancy, but also a love for nature:
Ever since she had come to the Hebrid Isles, her love of the sea had deepened, and had grown into a passion for its mystery and beauty. Of late, too, something impelled to a more frequent isolation: a deep longing to be where no eye could see and no ear hearken. Those strange dreams which in a confused way had haunted her mind in her far Breton home, came oftener now and more clear. (210)

Long ago had Lois . . . spoken of the danger that lay for Ynys, . . . the inheritor of a strange brooding spirit which belonged to her people. Now, in this remote place, the life of dream and the life of reality had become one; and Ynys was as a drifted ship among unknown seas and mists. (248)

Alan displays some un-Celtic masculine traits by growing ever more rational. This is exemplified by an inner monologue in which he ponders on the supernatural visions which he and his wife seem to have seen:

Was the island haunted, he wondered. . . . Or had he been startled into some wild fantasy, and imagined a likeness where none had been? Perhaps, even, he had not really seen any one. He had read of similar strange delusions. The nerves can soon chase the mind into the dark zone wherein it loses itself.

Or was Ynys the vain dreamer? That, indeed, might well be, and she with child, and ever a visionary. Mayhap she had heard some fantastic tale from Morag MacNeill or from old Marsail Macrae. (218)

While Ynys is convinced that the visions are indeed supernatural, Alan seeks for a rational explanation. Significantly, the two islanders whom he surmises to have contributed to Ynys’s superstitions are women, too: Morag and Marsail (also see 239), whose superstitions are also highlighted by other passages. Alan’s male rationalism increases as time goes by: “at last he came to the conviction that what he had seen was an apparition, projected by the fantasy of overwrought nerves” (223), and “the belief that he had been duped by his imagination deepened almost to conviction” (224). At the same time, his wife becomes ever more dreamy and irrational:

Day after day soft veils of dream obscured the bare realities of life. (224)

Ynys no longer doubted . . . that . . . a special message had come to her, a special revelation. On the other hand, he [Alan] had himself swung back to his former conviction: that the vision he had seen . . . was in truth . . . a living man. (238–39)
The contrast between husband and wife also becomes clear in several conversations where Ynys reasserts her belief in the supernatural character of her visions, while Alan contradicts because he “knew [them] to be a madness”—a formulation which also implies the narrator’s assent to this interpretation (244). Alan even fears that Ynys might become permanently insane (also see 246–49). Due to these dangers, Alan and the narrator see the eerie, superstition-ridden Hebrides in an increasingly negative light. Superstitions are called “unfortunate” (241) and are compared to “a poisonous weed” (225). The entire island world becomes associated with an unwholesome unreality—a “strange and dream-like life” (235), “a life of dream” (238), apparently incompatible with youth and happiness. Thus, Alan concludes that it would be best for himself and his wife to leave Rona again, exchanging the irredeemably oppressive gloom of the Gaidhealtachd for the more light-hearted and life-inducing Celticity of Brittany:

It is a mistake to be here, on Rona, now. . . . You and I are young, and we love: let us leave . . . these melancholy isles, and go back into the green sunny world wherein we had such joy . . . even . . . to Kerival, anywhere where we may live . . . with joy and glad content—but not here, not in these melancholy haunted isles, where our dreams become more real than our life, and life itself, for us at least, the mere shadow of being. (246)

His conviction that Gaelic dreaminess and superstition pose a danger to happiness, sanity, and life also inflects what he says after having found the outcast’s corpse, a discovery which proves that the visions were amenable to rational explanation: “Out of this all our new happiness may come. For now we know what is this mysterious shadow that has darkened our lives ever since we came to Rona. . . . Come, we will go now and never come here again” (252–53). As the Gaelic world is doomed, those who have the possibility of leaving should seek their individual happiness elsewhere, abandoning the Hebrides and the stay-behinds to their dark racial destiny. Belief in the omnipotence of the gloomy Gaelic strain is ultimately maintained, even in the face of such exceptions as the merry winter ceilidhs (social gatherings featuring conversation, storytelling, poetry, music, and dance): “It was a new delight to . . . Alan and Ynys to find that the islanders could be so genial and almost gay, with a love of laughter and music and grotesque humour which even in the blithe little fishing haven of Ploumaliou [in Brittany] they had never seen surpassed” (260). But the significance of such gaiety for the interpretation of Gaelic mentality and racial destiny is denied:

Laughter and tears, ordinary hopes and pleasures, and even joy itself and bright gaiety, and the swift spontaneous imagination of
susceptible natures—all this, of course, is to be found with the island Gael as with his fellows elsewhere. But, every here and there are some who have in their minds the inheritance from the dim past of their race, and are oppressed as no other people are oppressed, by the gloom of a strife between spiritual emotion and material facts. It is the trains of dreamers such as these which clear the mental life of the community; and . . . in these brains are the mysterious looms which weave the tragic and sorrowful tapestries of Celtic thought. It were a madness to suppose that life in the isles consists of nothing but . . . melancholy. It is not so, or need not be so, for the Gael is a creature of shadow and shine. But whatever the people is, the brain of the Gael hears a music that is sadder than any music there is, and has for its cloudy sky a gloom that shall not go, for the end is near, and upon the westernmost shores of these remote isles, . . . the Voice of Celtic Sor-row may be heard crying Cha till, cha till, cha till mi tuille—I will . . . return no more. (235–36)

Like Arnold, Sharp occasionally admits that the gloom thesis does not tell the whole story of Celtic or Gaelic life. But—again similarly to Arnold—Sharp dismisses these exceptions to his gloomy rule as irrelevant to the general picture, by claiming that the truest Celtic spirits are the gloomy ones. His phrase “the end is near” alludes to the imminent death of the Gaelic race and its culture, while the Gaelic words quoted at the end of this passage hint at one of the causes for this cultural decline, that is, emigration: they echo a Gaelic song which is often thought to have been sung by emigrants going overseas. Sharp’s vision of the Gaels’ racial future might go further than emigration, dispersal, and a resultant loss of cultural distinctness, to encompass the biological death of the race. This is suggested by Ynys’s failure to bear living offspring on the island, which symbolizes a general sterility and a failure of the community to replicate itself. The symbolic function of children as tokens of cultural rebirth is also reflected in the narrator’s remark that “the perpetu-ation of life is the unconscious protest of humanity against the destiny of mortality” (179). Apart from referring to human mortality in general, this might also allude specifically to racial mortality. The association of child-birth with the general survival of Hebridean culture becomes explicit in the hopes which Ynys harbors for her firstborn during her pregnancy: unwilling to accept the decline of Scottish Celtlicity as inevitable, she dreams of a Celtic messiah who will be born to save his race. Already before her arrival in Scotland, “no legend fascinated her more than that . . . of how Arthur the Celtic hero would come again . . . and redeem his lost receding peoples” (31). The Hebrideans are shown to harbor similar hopes (e.g., 233–34). Ynys comes to believe that her first baby will be that savior, and that the mysterious man from everybody’s visions is a prophet of this coming:
His . . . presence there upon Rona seemed a pre-ordained thing for her. . . . She felt . . . assured that some hidden destiny had controlled all this . . . mischance, had led her and Alan there to that lonely island.

She knew that the wild imaginings of the islanders had woven the legend of the Prophet, . . . out of . . . the longing and the deep nostalgia whereon is woven that larger tapestry, the shadow-ridden life of the island Gael. . . .

Ynys . . . too dreamed her Celtic dream—that, even yet, there might be redemption for the people. She did not share the wild hope which some of the older islanders held, that Christ Himself shall come again to redeem an oppressed race; but might not another Saviour come . . . ? And . . . might not that child of joy be born . . . of her? (234–37)

Has not the prophet said that one shall be born upon this island who will redeem his oppressed people? He has said . . . that . . . the child I shall bear will be he of whom men have dreamed in the isles for ages. (247)

This hope for a Gaelic savior and the regeneration of the Hebridean community is disappointed: her child is stillborn (254, 257), which signifies that the decline and death of the Gaelic race are unavoidable. The image of sterility is reinforced by the comparison of the baby to a “snowdrop” (257), a token of winter, the season in which little seems to grow. While the general future of Hebridean Gaeldom appears hopeless indeed, the personal future of the cosmopolitan, educated, and part-Breton upper-class couple Alan and Ynys seems much brighter. Once her hopes for a messiah have been shattered, Ynys recovers from her brooding and madness (257–58, 260), which again implies that Celtic dreaming is an impediment to life. Only if the inevitable realities of racial decline are accepted can some lucky few of the Celts survive and escape into a happier, though perhaps less racially pure, future elsewhere—Alan and Ynys escape to Brittany, which is still Celtic but not quite as purely or typically Celtic as the Gaidhealtachd. Although there is a brief period after the couple’s recovery when they toy with the idea of staying on Rona after all (260), they are relieved when the death of other family members calls them home to Brittany:

With light hearts they realised . . . that they were free at last of a life for which they were now unfitted. (269)

Ynys . . . was . . . glad to leave Rona and return to Brittany. . . .

. . . Ynys clearly realised the deep gladness with which she left the lonely Isle. . . . That it would have been impossible for her to live there long she was now well assured; and for Alan, too, the life was
not suitable. For the north, and for the islands, they would ever have a deep feeling almost sacred in its intensity; but all that had happened made living there ... difficult and painful for them; and, moreover, each ... missed that green woodland ... which made ... Kerival so fragrant. (267–68)

The feelings of the protagonists for the Hebrides reflect what many representatives of the Celtic Renaissance felt: a duality between deep affection for an idealized rural Gaidhealtachd and a sense that this affection often thrives best at a distance, from a safe base in more densely populated and less savage places. The latter, more “civilized” locations were ultimately the preferred homes for authors like Sharp, who cherished the remote Isles as a temporary escape and spiritual reference point rather than as a real focus of one’s life. This is also reflected when the narrator likens Alan and Ynys’s return to Brittany to the journey of “pilgrims returning homeward from a shrine sacred to them by profound and intimate associations” (268). The Gaidhealtachd is a spiritual shrine which can be worshipped on the spot only on a part-time basis; for the rest of the time it is best worshipped from a distance.

For the protagonists of Green Fire, a happy life and a new, living baby (282) are only possible outside Gaelic Scotland. The Gaels who stay in the Isles, mostly lower-class characters, are left behind without a savior. The few members of the Hebridean upper classes who feature in this novel (mainly indirectly through reports given by other characters) also tend to die premature and sometimes violent deaths. This applies not only to those who remain in Scotland but also to those who migrate to France, such as Lois or Alan’s father. Even for the Celts of Brittany, a successful and happy life seems extraordinarily difficult to attain: the only characters who enjoy a happy ending are Alan and Ynys, while most of the other characters from both upper and lower classes experience a more tragic outcome—Annaik and Tristran lead essentially unhappy lives and, later in the story, die, while Annaik’s lover Judik is a gloomy pauper who dwells in the woods. The Celtic mentality always threatens to pose an obstacle to life and happiness. The novel’s two protagonists—as well as, presumably, many mainstream Celtic Revivalists like Sharp and his readers—can only enjoy the hyper-Celtic Hebrides on a part-time basis, as a site for brief escapades and holidays before they get on with their real lives elsewhere. The merely temporary validity of Gaelic landscapes and Gaelic culture as a playground where fantasies can be acted out for a finite period of escapism which ultimately must be abandoned for the serious pragmatics of real life is also reflected in the association of Celtic romance with adolescence. The same association appears in Walter Scott’s Waverley and Robert Louis Stevenson’s Kidnapped (1886). In Sharp’s Green Fire, Alan and Ynys’s Gaelic dabblings are similarly connected to a growing-up phase, their first months of married life and adult responsibility. Their total immersion in Hebridean life is just a passing phase before
adult disillusionment and increased social responsibilities as manor-house owners lead the protagonists elsewhere. The theme of growing up is highlighted when their return to Brittany after less than two years in Scotland is described as a return to a place where “they had been young” (274)—as if they had lost their youth entirely in those brief months. The implication is that they have grown up, and that the Hebrides and Celtic dreaming are unfit for adults, although they have made an important contribution to the protagonists’ emotional and intellectual development.

Both Sharp and Arnold suggest that the Celtic or Gaelic world, while unable to sustain a viable social community and future of its own in an inevitably hostile modern world, can nonetheless play a praiseworthy role as a romantic and poetic counterweight to a modern metropolitan culture, offering a valuable complement to the latter by providing spiritual escapism. The same logic underlies Sharp’s dual authorial identity as the Lowland male intellectual William Sharp on the one hand, and the romantic female Highland writer Fiona Macleod with interests in the supernatural on the other. Her female alter ego offered Sharp a temporary escape into an alternative Celtic and romantic self, although in essence he remained a male Lowlander. A similar duality can be discerned in the novel’s treatment of the supernatural: Celtic folklore, romance, and superstitions are exploited for thrill and effect, but readers and protagonists are ultimately provided with rational explanations. Thus, even within the book there is a return from otherworldly escapism to a more realistic mode. The escapist potential of Highland romance presumably also appealed to “Macleod’s” readers. Escapism tends towards a strong romanticization and idealization of the Celtic world, despite the shortcomings which the novel identifies. Concrete historical experiences and unpleasant details of present-day social life are obscured.

One consequence of this logic is the exaggeration of Celtic cultural purity: if the Celtic world is to function as a temporary escape from readers’ ordinary modern lives, it must be presented as a site where modernity truly cannot reach (at least not yet), a site which is completely Other. To a certain extent, such a portrait is also presented in Green Fire: although the references to the “dying race” trope imply the powerful encroachment of a non-Celtic modernity, other aspects of the novel construct a Celtic world which is unrealistically pure. Non-Celtic people, cultures, or places hardly feature at all; and little cultural hybridization between the Celts and the respective British “Teutonic” or French “Latin” mainstreams is shown to take place. All the principal characters are either Bretons or Gaels, who intermarry with each other and even learn each other’s languages rather than taking the more realistic course of intermixing with anglophone British or francophone French people. Encroaching non-Celtic mainstreams are almost entirely blocked from view, along with the existence of hybridized Celtic elites—Breton and Hebridean landlords all seem to be happily and naturally Celtic-speaking:
The Marquise, true Gael of the Hebrid Isles . . . loved the language of her people, and spoke it, as she spoke English, even better than French. (23)

Armorican was exclusively used throughout the whole Kerival region, was the common tongue in the manor itself, and was habitually affected even by the Marquis. (23–24)

Latterly, . . . Ynys had become as familiar with the one Celtic tongue as the other. (24)

These idealized elites are also interested in other Celtic traditions, in whose proliferation they take an active part. Annaik sings Breton folk ballads by heart (24). Alan “loved to tell anew, in Breton, to the peasants of Kerival, some of the wild north-tales, or to relate in Gaelic to his aunt and to Ynys the beautiful folk-ballads of Brittany” (26). Similar cultural purity is claimed for Gaelic Scotland. Clanship and the Gaidhealtachd’s elites are idealized, and no cultural breach between tenants and landlords is discernible when Lois tells Alan about the Hebridean islands of Rona, Mingulay, and Boro-
say: “these . . . were once populous, and it was there that for hundreds of years your father’s clan, of which he was hereditary chief, lived and prospered” (133). The generation of Alan’s father is portrayed as if they were old-fashioned chieftains although the novel is set in the second half of the nineteenth century. The supreme chief of the Rona region is even referred to by the unusual epithet “the Lord of the South Isles” (228)—capitalization suggests that this is an official title, while such a title in fact never existed. The closest approximation is the medieval Lord of the Isles, to which the narrator probably means to allude. The application of such a title in a nineteenth-century context elides several centuries of Hebridean political history and Scottish centralization, in the course of which the quasi-autonomy that the medieval Gaidhealtachd had possessed under the Lords of the Isles had crum-
bled, and during which local elites had been progressively anglicized or even replaced by English and Lowland incomers altogether. The only historical breach admitted in this context is the post-1745 depopulation which Lois alludes to on page 133—but even here she seems to lay the blame entirely on central government policies without acknowledging the complicity of modernizing local elites.

Two important traumas of modern Highland history are indeed mentioned, but only in strongly softened or even romanticized terms. One of these traumas is the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 and its aftermath, notably the post-Culloden flight of “Bonnie Prince Charlie” from his pro-Hanoverian persecutors through the Gaidhealtachd before he escaped on a ship to France. Green Fire romanticizes these events, focusing not on the intricacies of Jacobite politics but on individual adventures and moral bravery: “the evil days,
when the young king was hunted in the west . . . , and when our brave kinswoman, Flora Macdonald, proved that women as well as men could dare all for a good cause” (133). The precise identity of that “cause” is not specified and discussed. Lois’s reference to Charles Edward Stuart as “king” does suggest Jacobite sympathies, as it implies a belief in the continued legitimacy of that family’s claim to the throne. However, her main emphasis lies elsewhere, on romance and individual gallantry. Lois is not the only voice that, from the safe distance of a long-pacified nineteenth-century world, expresses romantic sympathies with Jacobitism: the narrator does the same, again by applying the epithet “king” to the Stuart prince, when he talks of “the time when the last Scottish king took shelter in the west” (165). Other allusions to Jacobitism can be found in Lois’s assertions that her own, Alan’s, and Alasdair’s fathers had all been officers in the French Army (134, 136), which was a common career path for exiled Jacobites. The most explicit reference to 1745 and its outcome is the narrator’s still rather oblique mention of “the evil time after Culloden” (184).

The second concrete event of Highland history which the novel refers to, again with a softening brevity which obscures the details of suffering and thus renders the margin’s traumatic experiences palatable to an escapist and romantic metropolitan readership, is the mid-nineteenth-century potato blight which resulted in famine and depopulation: “the year of the great blight, when the potatoes and the corn came to nought, and when the fish . . . swam away from the isles. In the autumn of that year there was not a soul left on Rona except Silis Macdonald and . . . her father” (229). Unlike Jacobitism, the famine is hardly idealized in this text. Nonetheless, a romantic element can be discerned even here, as the mood in which the famine is remembered is elegiac and vague, lacking realistic detail which might convey the full implications of suffering and oppression, and failing to draw any pragmatic conclusions for present or future resistance. Highland history is presented as a tragedy without remedy—although this novel came out at a time when the realities of Gaelic life were dominated by a very practical land agitation movement which had been active for over a decade. The critical potential of the novel’s reference to the famine is further blunted by the fact that the disaster is only blamed on natural causes which are beyond social control (and thus also beyond resistance): potato blight and scarcity of fish. The role of clearances and landlordism are left out of the picture: the few members of the Highland elites who are mentioned appear to be benevolent traditional chieftains, with the exception of the even more benevolent, democratically minded Alan who occasionally helps the commoners with the fishing, laboring like the others (209), and who generously leaves his small castle to these islanders as their new communal home when he returns to Brittany (267).

This escapist outlook implies that a Celtic Renaissance is only possible in literature, but not on the level of social reality and economic or political
reform. Literature functions as a substitute for social regeneration. The same logic underlies the following comment about Alan:

In heart and brain that old world lived anew. Himself a poet, all that was fair and tragically beautiful was for ever undergoing in his mind a . . . magical resurrection . . . wherein what was remote and bygone, and crowned with oblivious dust, became alive again . . . intense and beautiful. (37–38)

This passage, like *Green Fire* as a whole, implies that the resurrection of the old Celtic world is only possible “in heart and brain” and in the literary imagination, a project which reflects not only Alan’s interests but also the preoccupations informing the entire literary work of “Fiona Macleod.” Moreover, “her” oeuvre suggests that even in the realm of literature Celtic culture can only be preserved in mediated, that is, anglicized, form: “she” writes in English, although “her” work often includes snippets of Gaelic or Breton text such as proverbs, incantations, names, or poetry, usually in both the original language and English translation. Some of these represent authentic fragments taken, for instance, from Alexander Carmichael’s collection *Carmina Gadelica* (in *Green Fire*, e.g., 181–82). This real-life folklorist also seems to have inspired the naming of the fictional character of Alan’s father in *Green Fire*. Like Macpherson and Arnold, Sharp suggests that Celtic literature cannot survive in its “pure” form and in its own language, but only as an inspiration for, or a local branch of, anglophone mainstream literature:

Proud as I might be to be Highland, or Scottish, or Irish, or Welsh, or English, I would be more proud to be British—for, there . . . we have a bond to unite us all. . . .

As for literature, there is, for us all, only English literature. All else is provincial or dialectic.

But gladly I . . . am willing to be designated Celtic, if the word is to signify no more than that one is an English writer who . . . has an outlook not distinctly English, . . . with a racial instinct that informs what one writes, and, for the rest, a common heritage.

The Celtic element in our national life has a . . . great part to play . . . , not to perpetuate feuds, not to try to win back what is gone away . . . but . . . to achieve, that . . . what is left of the Celtic races, of the Celtic genius, may permeate the greater race of which we are a vital part, so that with this . . . Celtic emotion, . . . love of beauty, and . . . spirituality . . . a nation may issue, . . . refined and strengthened by the . . . Celt and Saxon, united in a common fatherland. 39

Sharp’s work shows that even those Victorian literary texts which remain strongly indebted to earlier romantic models—that is, which idealize rather
than denigrate the Gaelic Other—are not entirely free from the influence of more recent developments in nineteenth-century race theory. Although Sharp sympathizes with the Celtic margins, his defense of the Other employs several tropes from race theory. Like Arnold, he reiterates romantic stereotypes about the Celtic mentality which predated the Victorian era, but hardens them into a racial typology. *Green Fire* dramatizes the often destructive intrusions of a dark, atavistic Celtic racial character into nineteenth-century lives. The Victorian fascination with this subject is also reflected in a contemporary review which discerned in “Macleod’s” work a “strange, barbaric element, which sometimes breaks up even the thick crust of an elaborate civilisation.”

This review throws additional light on the connections between overseas and intra-Scottish colonial discourse, as the theme of ancient barbaric strata breaking through the crust of civilization also occurs in texts which are concerned with overseas “barbarian” or “savage” “races,” such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

**Anthropology and the Intellectuals of the Gaelic Revival**

Sometimes racial theories were even internalized by members of the Gaelic intelligentsia. The Scottish Celtic scholar John Stuart Blackie shared the belief in racial differences, but instead of denigrating the Celts, he hoped that they would have a civilizing influence on their (part-)Saxon conquerors. He thought that Celtic literature was also worth preserving for the Celts’ own purposes and in their own languages. Celtic languages were not merely appreciated on antiquarian terms, but as living tongues.

Further intellectuals who squared Gaelic revivalism with race theory can at times be encountered in the scholarly journal *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, containing papers presented at the Gaelic Society’s meetings. The following pages consider two papers in detail: Rev. J. Macgregor’s “Celts and Teutons: A Study in Anthropology” and L. Macbean’s “The Mission of the Celt.”

Macgregor charts the history of Celts and Teutons from biblical to modern times. He shares various mainstream notions about racial character. For example, he describes the Celts—here meaning mainly Gauls and Gaels (“Celts and Teutons” 30)—as “quick, lively, courageous, and eager for change,” and the Teutons as “patient, methodical, and persevering” (31). For anti-Celtic authors like Knox, these attributes often implied that the Celts’ rashness, fickleness, and blind (though gallant) daring-do made them inferior to the more efficient Teutons. Macgregor, however, regards both groups as equally meritorious master races in joint superiority over all others (e.g., 27, 31–32). Their supposed ability for international leadership and colonizing prowess is presented as eternal racial destiny. This becomes clear when he compares the prehistoric settlement of Europe by German and Celtic incomers to modern British colonialism overseas:
History repeats itself. The leading families of mankind, in the very early ages of the world, had to move . . . west . . . to find new openings for their energies, just as their descendants at the present day have to flock . . . to America, there to settle, and lay the foundations . . . of many new nations. (31)

This analogy between prehistoric Indo-European migrations and modern overseas colonialism is continued when Macgregor speculates about the “feelings . . . of the first travellers when they drew near the Hellespont, and saw, across the waves, what was to them . . . a new world” (31). In both historical scenarios, Celtic and Germanic migrants must cross an ocean before a continent can be settled. Even the wording (“new world”) evokes American parallels.

It was the destiny of both Celts and Teutons to leave their first homes far behind, and seek their fortune in an unknown land. . . . They made their way across [the Hellespont], and proceeded to take possession. A new inheritance lay before them, and . . . they were prepared to make a vigorous effort to secure themselves in it. The original inhabitants must have thought it rather hard to . . . give place to the invaders, but they were overpowered, and driven into remote corners. (31–32)

“Inheritance” suggests legitimacy, presumably bestowed by the laws of racial destiny. The image of chasing Europe’s earlier populations to geographical peripheries again suggests modern American parallels, that is, the westward push of the frontier and the creation of “Indian” reservations. Macgregor recounts how the victorious “Japhetic” incomers—Celts, Teutons, Greeks, and Slavs—settled in Europe, and concludes:

Celts and Teutons . . . have become the most famous of them all, and . . . united, they bid fair to possess the world. . . . Liberty and order are two of the greatest blessings which a nation can enjoy. . . . The two races . . . have been distinguished . . . for their attachment to these two great foundations upon which power rests. With the Celts the love of freedom seems to have always been the ruling passion. Witness the untiring zeal with which our forefathers resisted, against such tremendous odds, the power of Saxon England, when it was unrighteously exercised to crush them, in the middle ages. . . . The inherent principle . . . in their hearts . . . still abides, to keep down every unjust attempt to bear the sway over them. No doubt this . . . disposition . . . may be carried too far, and the Highlanders have on more than one occasion marred their fortunes by a too eager desire to have their own way. This was conspicuously the case in the history of the Highland clans. (32, italics mine)
Macgregor’s typology echoes earlier anti-Celtic discourse which juxtaposed Celtic unruliness against Saxon order. To illustrate his point, he uses historical examples of English-Scottish or Hanoverian-Stuart conflicts: Scotland’s medieval “Wars of Independence,” the time after the 1603 Union, the Battle of Killiecrankie, and the Jacobite rising of 1745. However, the familiar theme of Scottish or Gaelic threats to an English-dominated British status quo is immediately neutralized. First, these threats are contained in the past; the most recent one happened over 100 years before Macgregor’s time of writing. Second, the author at least partially redeems the image of Gaelic history by pointing out that in 1745 there were also many Highlanders who supported the Hanoverians (32–33). Third, he emphasizes that those individual rebellions should not be used as a basis for adverse generalizations about the Gaelic racial character:

It may be supposed that this [the 1745 rebellion, etc.] says very little for the capacity of the Celtic races to take a share in ruling the world. We shall see . . . how this overgrowth of an independent spirit has been tempered into manageable proportions.

With the Teutons . . . love of freedom has been no less strong than with the Celts, but it has been accompanied by an equally strong desire for order and settled government. We are accustomed to regard the Germans as a thoughtful, cautious race, whose delight is in philosophy, music, and . . . all that pertains to civilisation. And upon the whole this estimate is correct. The natural disposition of the people is towards the arts of peace. . . . Germany has for many centuries been the chief civiliser of the world. Let it not be supposed that this throws any discredit on our own country, for . . . the English are really a people of Teutonic descent, and . . . by their union with Scotland they have secured for our nation the two chief elements of national greatness.

. . . The relations . . . between the two principal branches of the Japhetic races have, for the most part, been . . . hostile. . . . Only in modern times . . . any kind of union between them has taken place. That union has been chiefly confined to English-speaking nations, and, even within these limits, Ireland forms a partial exception. The Irish difficulty, though closely connected with the subject of the present enquiry, must be left out of account, as it is a political problem that causes an unpleasant difference of opinion. We need not, however, hesitate to remark that the troubles of Ireland have arisen almost wholly from the ancient, and not yet quite extinct, feud between Celt and Teuton. (33–34)

Macgregor’s vision of an amicable Celtic-Teuton partnership of master races is again disturbed by memories of intra-British cultural, national—or, as he might put it, “racial”—conflict. Again, he counters this threat of ideological
destabilization by trying to contain the conflicts in the past, in pre-Union history. The greatest source of unease is Ireland, whose threats of insurrection preoccupied many Victorian minds. However, Macgregor downplays this problem, too, proclaiming that the ancient feud is almost over.

Macgregor believes in the potential of racial amalgamation and even declares that this was the foundation of modern France and Britain’s superpower status. French success, he claims, was based on a Germanic (Frankish) conquest of a Celtic people and on subsequent amalgamation of the former enemies and their respective assets, that is, the two major ingredients of national greatness, liberty, and order. In Britain, the burying of Teuton-Celtic animosities was likewise “for the most part to our advantage” (35):

We have a . . . habit of thinking of our own nation as the greatest in the world. . . . We have good grounds for our belief. But we are also apt to think that this pre-eminence has been ours for an indefinite period, . . . which is an error. . . . When England and Scotland were two separate nations . . . almost constantly at war with each other . . . , it was not possible for either of them to exercise much influence [at] the councils of Europe. (36)

The fusion of races was a work of time, and till it was carried out there was little but violence and disorder. (36)

This fusion was finally achieved with the Union of 1707, “the birth of a new nation, the greatest that the world has ever seen” (37). The merger was facilitated by geography: on the European Continent, post-conquest amalgamations had often failed “because . . . there was always plenty of elbow room,” so that “vanquished people could simply move . . . away” (37). But Britain is an island on the edge of Europe, where the vanquished could flee no further, so that amalgamation was the only option for survival. The role of Britain as Europe’s land’s end in intra-European colonial encounters is a very old theme in Scottish ideological history, for example, featuring in the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) and even in Tacitus’s *Agricola*. There, too, Scotland’s native inhabitants were portrayed as “the last of the free,” an isolated, still unconquered people facing an expanding empire, in a place where they could flee no further. In those older texts, this motif entailed a desperate wish to remain separate. But for Macgregor, land’s end has positive associations—joy about the eventual benefits of conquest and forced assimilation. Macgregor’s awareness of the Roman connotations is clear from his sketch of “the days of Queen Anne” (37), when Celtic-Teutonic fusion became tangible and “Britain first became the ruling power of the world” (37):

The British empire was not much longer to be confined to the old world. . . . Regions that Caesar never knew, and where his eagles
had never flown, were to be possessed by the descendants of the rude tribes of the North, whom he tried so hard to subdue. The valour of the one [the Celts], with the steady perseverance of the other [the Teutons], made the united nation so irresistible, and her people are now dominant in every quarter of the globe. (38) 

Britain, which in Roman times had been barbarian territory, has now risen to imperial glory itself. The same potential of emancipation and a rise from colonized rags to world-power riches is ungrudgingly granted to Britain’s own colonies:

[A] violent rupture took place last century between the North American colonies and the mother country. Nor is it . . . unlikely that in the process of time other colonies, both in the New World and at the Antipodes, may spring up into new nations. All this is part of the general law of nature, . . . children grown to manhood cease to depend upon the parent. This should be no cause for serious regret, and it is certainly no cause for thinking that the Anglo-Saxon, or rather the Anglo-Celtic race, has begun to decline. . . . The right view to take is, that new nations springing from the old stock . . . carry the vigour and the enterprise of the races from which they have sprung, in a chain of increasing strength around the world. (38)

His readiness to concede “grown-up” colonial “children” a right to independence resembles Robert Knox’s attitudes. For both, however, this is limited to white settler societies largely sprung from British stock. Other colonies, where white minorities ruled over a numerically superior indigenous population as in Africa or India, are apparently excluded from Macgregor’s vision of emancipation, just as they are from Knox’s. This is suggested by Macgregor’s assertion that in future “the extension of the Anglo-Celtic race must go on till the language of Britain becomes the universal language, and British civilisation rules mankind” (39). That he speaks of “the language of Britain” in the singular is noteworthy—although this text is linked to the Gaelic revival, the preeminence of the English language and the linguistic assimilation of the Celtic fringe is not openly questioned.

Many themes of Macgregor’s essay reappear in Macbean’s, which is likewise concerned with racial destiny and the Celts’ position in the world at large (e.g., “Mission of the Celt” 56–57). Macbean explicitly writes back to earlier anti-Celtic stereotypes, but in a way which still stands on the shoulders of anglocentric writers—especially Arnold’s, it seems. But, like Macgregor, Macbean goes further than Arnold in several respects, as well as turning the defense of the Celtic internal colonized into a vision of Celtic glory in the role of overseas colonizer.
Macbean’s desire to write back to anti-Celticism is obvious in the following passage:

For more than a century there have been two views regarding the future of the Gaelic-speaking Highlander—the one held by supercilious Englishmen and echoed by feeble Highlanders, the other held by a small but patriotic set of Highlanders. The first view is that the Celt . . . is a relic of barbarism, a nuisance in the way of civilisation that must be speedily swept out of the way, with the exception that Celts who can transform themselves into imitations of Englishmen, be allowed to live on in subordinate positions suitable to their capabilities. . . . The second view . . . has been that of . . . patriots who protested against the invasion of the English tongue and English ideas, and declared that extinction was preferable to submission.

. . . Both views have been wrong. The Highlander is . . . in a better position than either . . . dreamed of. Our fate as a race is neither to die out nor to be Anglicised. On the contrary, it is important even for the future of Saxon civilisation that certain qualities of the Celtic nature should be preserved. (62)

For Macbean, every race has a valid contribution to make—or at least every white race, as the only ones he names in this context are Saxons, Jews, Slavs, Greeks, and Celts (56–57): “every race must add its own endowment to the common heritage of man, and the Celt must take care that the Celtic contribution is not . . . withheld” (57); “the Gaelic race must give its own contribution to the progress of humanity” (62). He argues that one task of the “Gaelic Renaissance” is to ensure that this Gaelic contribution is made and recognized (56, also see 57–61), both in the cultural and the socioeconomic realm. The particular contributions he assigns to each race are congruous with the racial typologies familiar from elsewhere. The Teutons, for instance, contribute “the fruits of plodding industry” (62), echoing Knox’s contention that Saxons are diligent and persevering. The Celts are said to cherish “ideals of freedom” (64), which resembles Macgregor’s text and romantic accounts of noble savagery. Macbean’s reference to Celtic “sentiments of humanity and lofty principle” (64) has precedents in various texts about the moral rigor of noble savages from Tacitus onwards, in Macpherson’s Ossianic sentimentality, and in Arnold’s theories. The Arnoldian streak is especially clear in the following passage:

The Gael has the very qualities in which the Saxon is most deficient. It is ideality, . . . sentiment, . . . enthusiasm, . . . èlan [sic], . . . intensity, . . . imagination, delicacy of fancy, humour, love of colour, love of nature . . . , in a word, all that is spirituelle and opposed to the sordid and the worldly. These are the very qualities which the Teutonic race
and modern utilitarian civilisation lack most, and the mission of the Celt is to supply them. (62–63, Macbean’s italics)

The first hint of Arnoldian connections might be discerned in Macbean’s use of the French adjective in the feminine spelling “spirituelle,” while a similar construction in a French text would use the masculine form. Perhaps this is a mere spelling error, like “èlan” for élán. But there may be a deeper significance: perhaps Macbean, whether purposefully or unconsciously, used the feminine form because he considered the Celts to be a feminine race—an idea also propagated by Arnold, to whom Macbean’s account owes so much and who is explicitly mentioned in the paragraph below the “spirituelle” passage (63). In the passage quoted here, the second hint of Arnoldian connections is the notion that the Celtic character perfectly complements the Teutonic one, supplying what the latter lacks, and for the latter’s benefit. This is also a major tenet of Arnold’s. Macbean probably has Arnold in mind when he remarks that his own views had previously been advanced by English writers (63). Macbean presents these parallels in English discourse as an argument in favor of his own thesis—which again reflects how much his “writing back” still defers to English discursive authority. Likewise in Arnoldian fashion, he asserts:

Of course an educated Englishman is smarter than an ignorant Highlander; but taking both races on the lowest level, . . . a lecturer or vocalist would be more likely to find an intelligent and responsive audience among the crofters of a Highland clachan than among the heavy, clod-hopping, honest hinds [farm laborers] of an English rural district. The . . . Gael (like all Celts) is nervous, sensitive to the influences from the unseen, much impressed by . . . death . . . , keenly sensitive to the lash of conscience. He is by nature an idealist and enthusiast. (63)

However, Macbean is uneasily aware of the impossibility of neat categorization. He acknowledges exceptions to his racial typology—not all Englishmen are dull, and not all Gaels are temperamental. But, like Knox, he evades the unsettling implications of hybridity by immediately reiterating and reaffirming racialist dogma: “we British are a mixed people, and there is in these islands no such thing as purity of race. . . . But still we must hold to the broad facts” (63).

Despite such assertions of purity, Macbean—like Arnold—advocates greater intermixture and cross-fertilization between Celt and Saxon, and identifies instances where this has already happened, for example, Celtic influence on anglophone British literature, mainstream music, and theology (64–65). He also draws the Arnoldian conclusion that this represents a spiritual triumph of the Celtic colonized over their Saxon colonizers: “modern British life is becoming Celticised. The Celtic population had to recede before the aggressive Saxon, but the Celtic spirit conquers in the end” (65).
Celticization also extends to Britain’s genetic makeup, for example because “city life is so enfeebling that few families are able to stand it for more than two generations” (65–66), so that dead town-dwellers must always be replaced by a fresh influx of country-folk from the Highlands who thus reinvigorate the British racial stock—both physically and morally. In support, Macbean quotes a royal commission on the crofter question which asserted:

The ... population of the Highlands ... is a nursery of good workers and citizens for the whole empire. ... The stock is exceptionally valuable. By sound physical constitution, native intelligence, and good moral training, it is particularly fitted to recruit the people of our industrial centres.⁴⁶

Macbean summarizes the Celts’ function for the nation as follows: “by infusion of ideas and transfusion of blood to leaven modern civilisation with its own awakening spirit. It is to ... transform by nobler sentiments the results of art and science and culture as these have been evolved by the sturdy Anglo-Saxon race” (66). But Macbean, unlike Arnold, thinks that the Celtic race can only fulfill this function if it retains the Celtic languages as living forms of expression—only then can their racial identity (with its many merits) be preserved (58). That Macbean’s support for Celtic distinctness goes further than Arnold’s is also clear in the following passage, especially its opening sentences which directly seem to write back to On the Study of Celtic Literature:

Are we Gaels to be simply lost in the great ocean of Saxon civilisation? Must we become extinct as a race, our only immortality being a slightly more spirituelle aroma about English literature, and a slightly less German cast of the features of the English people? ... But to the real question—Whether the Gaelic race as a race is to survive and take a recognised part in the ... civilisation of the future. ... If the Gael is to be a real and acknowledged factor ... he must preserve his heritage of Celtic ideals, and ... endeavour to rid his character of its historic weaknesses. (66–67)

These weaknesses are “fatalism and pessimism” (68), “instability” (67), and “pride” (67–68). Moreover, Macbean implores his fellow Celts:

We must learn ... humility and brotherliness towards other races. If ... the Celts are the oldest Aryan race in Europe, they ought to act the part of an elder brother. The Gael ought especially to make himself master of English literature and science and art. ... For the perfecting of his own nature, as well as for the serving of the empire and the world, he must cast away his traditional pride, and assimilate the best that modern civilisation can produce. (67–68)
We shall be better Celts when we rid ourselves of these weaknesses, but if we are to remain Celts . . . , not to speak of Celtising the British nation, we must keep in touch with the spirit of the race as embodied in our literature and traditions, for any real progress must bear some relation to the past. While appropriating the civilised institutions, the industrial arts, the literature, and even the language of the Saxon, we must remain Gaels. It is only thus that we can have any real power. (68–69)

This desire for “real power” distinguishes Macbean from Arnold. For the latter, the Celts’ importance was largely confined to the past, apart from limited influences on present and future anglophone literature. For Macbean, the Celtic contribution extends more strongly into the present and future, as well as into the practical, material spheres of politics (64) and overseas imperialism. The latter is expressly recommended to the Gaels as a compensation for their history of victimization by British internal colonialism: “We should like to see our . . . Gaelic nation playing a high and noble role even yet on the stage of history. . . . All that is best in the empire is already ours for the taking, and . . . the opportunity of serving the empire is open to us all” (66–67). To illustrate this, he stresses the Celtic element among colonial governors (64), religious missionaries, and imperial soldiers (64–65). For Macbean, Celtic participation in British overseas imperialism is clearly a matter of pride. And the particular qualities of the Celtic character are recommended as invaluable assets for colonizers and a morally redeeming force for Britain’s global civilizing mission:

Civilisation has terrible problems that await solution. Side by side with its enormous increase of intellectual and material wealth there is an increase of degradation and vice. It needs the touch of some Celtic fairy to change it into some semblance of her own ideals. The British Empire . . . is founded on brute force, and it needs to be inspired with Celtic sentiment and sympathy, and lofty idealism, and the generous chivalry of Ossian and Fionn. . . . On some such lines . . . Providence intends the Gael to accomplish his mission. (69)

Macbean’s wish to inspire the brutal materialism of an empire built by Saxons with the spirituality and moral vision of the Celts again echoes Arnold’s gendered racial typology: Victorian concepts of gender portrayed women as guardians of morality, spirituality, and idealism which counterbalanced and ennobled the gritty, practical, materialist male spheres of politics and business. The Celts as a feminine race play a similar role in Macbean’s vision of the Celtic-Saxon imperialist partnership. The morally redeeming function of the feminine touch in an otherwise over-harsh male-dominated imperialism is also apparent in Kurtz’s “Intended” in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Macbean
criticizes the “Gaelic gloom” cliché not primarily because it supports Anglo-British internal colonialism on the Celtic fringe, but because it might prevent the Celts from becoming successful colonizers themselves:

Until quite lately, we seem to have been a race under some evil enchantment. We were ashamed of our Gaelic, ashamed of being Highlanders, and, like a people in dotage, living only in the past. Our music was only in the minor key. . . . But all this is changed. . . . The Gael feels the current of youth coursing through his veins. He knows that a high destiny awaits him. (69)

Much of this “high destiny” lies in overseas colonialism: the Gaelic revival as perceived by Macbean helps to transform Britain’s Celts from colonized to colonizer.

Both Macbean and Macgregor transplant racialist theories from an originally anglophone Teutonist background to an intellectual coterie speaking for, and partly even from, the Gaelic margin. Their reinterpretation of Celticist racial typology transformed the alleged weaknesses of a subject people into the strengths of a global master race whose fate and merits were equally glorious as that of their erstwhile Saxon conquerors, so that both could now proceed hand in hand to subdue the rest of the globe. The perpetual dialectic of the Celtic margin’s predicament as both Other and Same could hardly be illustrated more clearly.