

Clearing the Cloak of Manannan: Integrating the History and Cultures of the Irish Sea into the Secondary School Curriculum

Suzanne Hertzberg

7 March 2010

32nd Annual Celtic Studies Conference

University of California Los Angeles

I have the honor today of speaking to specialists, scholars, experts in your respective fields. Along with pursuing your own research, you teach aspiring scholars who sign up for your classes voluntarily, out of interest in the knowledge you have to offer. At least, that's how it looks to the outsider; I'm sure the reality is more nuanced. Still, it is your painstaking work that brings new perspectives and discoveries to light and your scholarly contributions that create, energize, and refine movements in theory and interpretation.

In your company, I am an interloper. A generalist. I teach adolescents who are mainly conscripts, not volunteers, in my classroom. My expertise lies in engaging 14-and 15-year olds in their educational journeys through my discipline, ideally in a way that competes favorably with their real interests, which generally revolve around the biological imperative. We teachers are charged with imparting a host of critical thinking and learning skills that as a society we agree (at least I certainly hope we agree) are fundamental not only for future scholars but for all future adults, whose ideas and decisions impact the course of civilization no matter what they become when they grow up. And we are charged with teaching this set of skills within the context of a body of content that for most teachers is mandated by state curriculum (more on this a bit.) If we're lucky, the spark of love of learning gets ignited along the way.

To inspire us to ignite those sparks, the National Endowment for the Humanities puts a few of our tax dollars to work supporting the intellectual and cultural enrichment of America's educators. I think it works.

When I applied for the NEH summer seminar entitled, “The Isle of Man: Crossroads of Medieval Cultures and Languages,” I could not have located the Isle of Man on a map and had never heard of the “Irish Sea Cultural Zone” or, I’m sorry to say, the *Mabinogion*. The very course description itself opened up a field I didn’t know existed, as my knowledge of Irish history before the 20th century was limited to *How the Irish Saved Civilization* and reproductions of the psychedelic illuminations of the *Book of Kells*.

What an eye-opener. The seminar exposed me to the geography, archaeology, philology, history, and literature of a fascinating region I had known virtually nothing about and had certainly never taught. But as I read, saw, and learned more, I began wondering: why is this region virtually ignored in the high school curriculum? Many high school students do dip into the literature, *Beowulf*, perhaps, and if they’re independent readers or lucky enough to have interesting senior course offerings, some of the Arthurian canon. But the historical context for these works is virtually nonexistent in the curriculum. Like many literary scholars, my seminar leader holds Tolkien’s position on this matter with me, arguing that these works have powerful, intrinsic literary value and should be savored on their own. But my answer is that even if historical context is of secondary importance, as Tolkien’s school maintains, it’s still critically important. After all, as we have been reminded recently in Whistler [site of the skiing events in the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics], second place gets you a silver medal and is pretty much within a hair’s breadth of first. If we acknowledge the value of the medieval literary canon enough to teach it to high school students, we ought to give them the historical scaffolding.

Wherever the English and History departments stand on the awards podium, there are three additional justifications for introducing this material at the secondary level.

First, there’s a lot of duplication between middle school and high school content. The prevailing wisdom is that content is a vehicle for skills development. We freely acknowledge that

nearly all the “content” covered in middle school will be repeated in high school. Yet even given the need for recursive consideration of content in light of students’ advancing skills, the repetition—Mesopotamia, Egypt, a smattering of ancient China and India, Greece, Rome, a drive-by wave at the Byzantine Empire, a thousand-years of the Middle Ages in a monolithic lump, and all of this twice before our students even get their driving permits—can feel, well, *boring*. It adds to the adolescent perspective—and unfortunately, sometimes even the administrators’ perspective—that history consists entirely of these particular case studies. Otherwise, why would we repeat them?

State content standards are part of the challenge here. The California Board of Education History-Social Studies Standards, for example, lists a pretty impressive set of intellectual skills for grades nine through twelve. However, they also prescribe a content sequence prefaced by the following admonition:

“The intellectual skills [noted below] are to be learned through, and applied to, the content standards for grades nine through twelve. They are to be assessed *only in conjunction with* the content standards in grades nine through twelve” (*History-Social Science Standards*)

To make sure we get the message clearly, “only in conjunction with” is italicized. Now good standards, high standards, are necessary and laudable. But why must crucial intellectual skills—theoretically transferable intellectual skills—be taught “*only in conjunction with*” the same old favorites? The adolescent brain already makes snap judgments, thinks in black and white. There is danger in perpetuating a reductionist view of history, especially when we’re charged with training young minds to enter a world in which critical thinking and nuanced understanding are perhaps more important than ever before. Why not exercise the transferability of intellectual skills early and often? Surely, the more practice young people get in exercising their minds, the better off we’ll all be.

To this end, the content sequence would benefit from some new perspectives. In his review of Barry Cunliffe’s *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and Its Peoples 8000 BC-AD 1500*, Ray Laurence notes a

“revival of interest in the sea as a focus for the study of classical and medieval history and/or archaeology.” The current curriculum does address the sea as a conduit between regions and cultures—the Mediterranean Sea. About the sea-highways that connect the British Isles to one another and to the continent, our students learn snippets at best: maybe a mention of Pythias and Julius Caesar’s visits to Britain, Roman rule, Boudicca, Hadrian’s wall, the retreat of Rome as the empire faltered, a sentence or two about Angles and Saxons and the re-Christianization of Britain (perhaps with a bit of King Arthur thrown in), the Norman invasion, the rise of English institutions and power. Yet, according to Brendan Smith’s *Britain and Ireland 900-1300*, the Irish Sea functioned as a center of commerce comparable to the Mediterranean, a “vast conveyor belt for people, things, and ideas,” a “tapestry of interdependence” that formed a “true economic and cultural region.” In *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Peter Brown dubs the Irish Sea a “Celtic Mediterranean.”

My experiences exploring the landscape, literature, and linguistic heritage of the Irish Sea cultural zone underscore Smith and Brown’s assertions. Standing on the windswept summit of Snaefell, the highest point on the Isle of Man, one can literally—and quite easily—see the historical five kingdoms of the Irish Sea: England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and the Isle of Man. Neolithic and Bronze Age burial sites, astonishingly accessible with just a short walk through a hilly meadow, attest to the early settlement of the islands after the end of the last Ice Age and the introduction of Celtic culture. Viking artifacts and elaborately inscribed grave markers show the blending of Celtic and Nordic peoples in the wake of Viking incursions of the ninth and tenth centuries. Whether or not the annual Tynwald really does constitute, as advertised, the world’s oldest Parliament, its thousand-year tradition certainly represents the continuity of and respect for Man’s Viking legacy. Linguistic analysis reveals the development of Celtic languages as they spread, settled, and differentiated. The distribution of ogham stones from Ireland to Wales allows archaeologists to chart paths of interaction across the Irish Sea. Cross-cultural elements abound in the literature of the region: *Njal’s*

Saga includes a scene of the Battle of Clontarf fought in Ireland in 1014 AD, and describes a sophisticated Icelandic legal system that surely contributed to the development of English law. The character of Manawydan in the *Mabinogi* (now I'm treading in your areas of expertise, so please be gentle in your criticism) has mythic and linguistic connections to the enigmatic sea god, Manannan, who is closely tied with the Isle of Man and also plays a role in the fabulously earthy, bloody, extravagantly fantastical Irish epic whose title I will not attempt in this company to pronounce in the original Irish, the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*. *Beowulf* spans the confluence of Norse and Anglo-Saxon, paganism and Christianity. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects the movement of Arthurian lore between Wales, England, and the continent.

It's all just too good to miss, and not necessary to miss, which leads to the second justification for inclusion in the curriculum: a growing body of teaching resources, a wealth of visual and literary material digitally accessible to teachers regardless of library budget constraints.

And the third justification? Consider the future of Celtic Studies. You may or may not be aware that this colloquium is competing with the L.A. Irish Fair and Music Festival at the Pomona Fairgrounds, about an hour's drive southeast of UCLA. If you hurry—and I won't be insulted if you leave—you can catch the Rovers Three, the Dublin Four, or the 42 Highlanders Pipe Band performing at the “Leprechaun Village Story Stage.” Alas, unless you went last night, you have missed True Thomas the Storyteller, Merlin the Magician, and Bill Howard of the Flash Packet, purveyors of sea shanties, who perform in authentic nautical costume.

No disrespect meant to any of these folks. Dancing is fun, music is good for the spirit and musicians need to make a living, storytelling is a venerable cultural tradition, and with St. Patrick's Day coming soon, the market needs to be primed for consumers to buy loads of shamrocks, corned beef, and green-tinted bagels. Yes, green bagels are available for purchase on St. Patrick's Day.

For academics, too, in these belt-tightening times, it's crucial to think about growing the market for Celtic studies scholars by generating interest in impressionable young minds, so they arrive at university eager to take your courses. So think of me as a recruiter, perhaps a sales rep, with an eye to preventing a future of corporate sponsorship as the alternative to university budget cuts.

Fortunately, I didn't have to work too hard to sell the idea of teaching the history and cultures of the Irish Sea to my department chair. She is a classical archaeologist and therefore naturally supportive of scholarly innovation in our small independent school, where we've traded job security and collective bargaining rights for small class sizes and curricular flexibility.

Between idea and implementation, though, lie opportunities and challenges. To begin with challenges: reading material. A wealth of resources for the enterprising teacher does exist, but our high school history textbooks are problematic. Textbooks are written by committee, with an eye to conforming to existing standards and practice, not by the scholars whose names appear as consultants to confer gravitas but who often may not even see the finished product. And content is driven not by educators but by school boards where politics and religion are at play, as we have seen in the evolution vs. creationism/"intelligent design" debate. So, in thinking about teaching an introduction to "Celtic studies," can existing textbooks teach students who the Celts and other peoples of the Irish Sea actually were, where they came from, and how we know what we know about them? A brief, unscientific literature search, consisting of the textbook for my Ancient Civilizations course plus a shelf-full of other history textbooks, yielded the following insights:

My textbook, *World History*, published by Pierson-Prentice Hall, chosen as the lesser of available evils—"evil" signifying impossibly simplistic—while still accessible to my ninth grade students' reading level, lacks any mention of Anglo-Saxons even in post-Roman "Invasions of Europe" or any mention of Celts; contains two short paragraphs on Vikings as "Raiders from the North"; mentions Scotland first only in connection with the Stuarts and Ireland first in connection

with Cromwell. Hmm. A tenth grade honors-level textbook published by MacDougal-Littell, dismisses the inhabitants of Britain as follows: Caesar "...even crossed the English Channel and battled the barbaric tribes who lived in Britannia" (145); and, "While these times were dark ones for scholars who loved Latin learning, the Early Middle Ages were a glorious time for Germanic kings and warriors" (201); one sudden, enigmatic reference to Celts: "By the end of fifth century...Rome's most distant province, Britannia, faced a double peril. Three fierce Germanic tribes—Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—attacked Britannia's eastern shores. At the same time, Celtic peoples—the Picts and Scots—raided Britannia from Ireland and Scotland" (201); one quote from Gildas the Wise about attacks of the Picts and Scots upon a Roman fortification: "The wretched citizens are pulled down from the wall and dashed to the ground by the hooked weapons of their naked foes" (545); and, three surprisingly decent pages devoted to the Viking Age, including visuals of a Viking ship and other accoutrements as well as an inset on berserkers, with mention of out-of-control warriors biting their wooden shields that will surely spark a lively student reaction. Another Pearson textbook, designed for Advanced Placement World History and heavily supported with primary source documents, also contains one lonely, rather unhelpful reference to Celts: "A raiding army of Celts, called Gauls by the Romans, invaded Italy from central Europe, wiped out the Roman army, and almost destroyed the city by fire" (Brummett 136). My final specimen was another Pearson AP textbook, Spodek's *World History*, in which at last appears a two-paragraph discussion of the Celts, only exciting by contrast with the paucity of material in the other textbooks and by virtue of actually mentioning Hallstadt and La Tène as caches of Celtic artifacts as well as Tacitus's description of the Celts. Earlier in the text appears a cursory discussion of Indo-European languages, "from which developed many of the principle languages of the lands to which they migrated and settled, from Britain in the northwest into Persia and India in the southwest" (Spodek 129). Short shrift is given to the Vikings. In sum, high school history textbooks aren't going to be much help at all.

Another source of pre-packaged curriculum is the NEH offshoot EDSITEment, a collection of online lesson plans. Grades 9-12 lesson plans exist for topics in Arthurian Legend, *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, The Magna Carta, and the ever-popular Black Death—lively lesson plans with excellent links to quality resources such as Georgetown University's online medieval portal, Labyrinth, but no lessons on the Irish Sea cultural province per se. This must be a new curriculum, one that will also satisfy both state and national skills standards but will also break new ground. And so, we come to a broad suggested outline for such a curriculum, beginning with the learning objectives.

Learning Objectives:

- to introduce the Irish Sea as a meaningful analog and counterpoint to the Mediterranean as a robust conduit for culture, commerce, and technology from Late Paleolithic times;
- to teach students about the Irish Sea as the cultural crossroads of the Irish, Welsh, Norse, Scots, and Anglo-Saxon people;
- to foster an appreciation for the multicultural reality of the British Isles and Ireland in the Middle Ages;
- to introduce the complex relationships between Briton, Saxon, Gaelic, Norse, and Latinate languages and cultures;
- to counter the persistent perception of the early middle ages as “Dark Ages” devoid of trade, wealth, and artistic sophistication;
- to provide a historical and cultural context for enriched appreciation and understanding of the medieval literature;
- to explore this content area in ways that fulfill the skills standards of intellectual reasoning and reflection in the areas of chronological and spatial thinking, historical evidence, research, point of view, and interpretation.

To achieve these objectives, I propose the following content components, to be shaped and adapted to suit the grade level and time available:

1. Place: the geography of the Irish Sea and beyond (orient students geographically; place the region within larger sphere including Europe, Scandinavia, Greenland and Iceland)
2. Time: establishing a general timeline so students can anchor their understanding to what they have learned about historical developments in other regions
3. Methodology: how do we know what we know?: an integrated approach considering archaeology, linguistic, and literary evidence to solve historical puzzles (adapt from J.P. Mallory)
4. The ice melts (source: National Geographic article “Humans Sped to U.K. After Ice Age”)
5. Who were the Celts, and why don’t our history books discuss them? (archaeological evidence, Iron Age Celtic design and technology, discussion of “shelf space” in textbooks)
6. Celtic migrations to the British Isles: why are there Celtic festivals and bagpipes in Galicia?
7. Irish, Welsh, Picts, Scots, and Manx—who were they, how did their languages develop and differentiate, and what became of them
8. Roman Britain and all that
9. After the Romans—who were all those “Barbarians”? Angles, Saxons, Jutes, mists of Arthur
10. Background to *Beowulf*
11. Background to and selections from the *Tain*
12. The old ways give way to Christianity: Manannan, Maughold, monasteries, and manuscripts
13. The Viking Age: Norse sagas, Icelandic law
14. Marvelous mixings on Man: ships, crosses, place names, and DNA
15. 1066 and its aftermath: background to medieval romance
16. Summary and legacy: re-integrating what students have learned about the Irish Sea region with their larger understanding.

All of this breaks exciting new ground and is what makes teaching interesting for me. I welcome your input—what would you like secondary students to learn, to introduce them to your field and inspire them to pursue Celtic studies?

Bibliography

Print

Alexander, J.J.G. and C.M. Kauffman. *English illuminated manuscripts 700-1500*.

Bruxelles : Bibliotheque Royale Albert Ier; supplied by Worldwide Books, Boston, 1973.

Brown, Peter. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity 200-1000*. Oxford, U.K.:

Wiley-Blackwell, 2003.

Brummett, Palmira, et al. *Civilization Past and Present, Primary Source Edition*. New York:

Pearson Education, 2007.

Calkins, Robert G. *Illuminated books of the Middle Ages*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press,

1983.

Cunliffe, Barry. *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek: The Man Who Discovered Britain*

New York: Walker & Co., 2002.

---. *Europe Between the Oceans: 9000 BC-AD 1000*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press,

2008.

---. *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and its Peoples 8000 BE-AD 1500*. Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2001.

Ellis, Elizabeth Gaynor and Anthony Esler. *World History*. Boston, MA: Pearson Prentice-Hall, 2009.

Hermannsson, Halldór. *Icelandic illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages*. Copenhagen: Levin &

Munksgaard, 1935.

- . *History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education, 1998.
- Krieger, Larry, et al. *World History: Perspectives of the Past, 5th Edition*. Evanston, IL.: McDougal Littell, 1997.
- Laurence, Ray. "The Sea in History." *The Classical Review, New Series* 52:100-101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Narkiss, Bezalel. *Hebrew illuminated manuscripts in the British Isles*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press for the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the British Academy, 1982.
- Ohlgren, Thomas H. *Insular and Anglo-Saxon illuminated manuscripts : an iconographic catalogue c. A.D. 625 to 1100*. New York and London: Garland, 1986.
- Smith, Brendan, ed. *Britain and Ireland 900-1300. Insular Responses to European Change*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Smith, Brendan. *Colonization and Conquest in Medieval Ireland: The English in Louth 1170-1300*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press 1999.
- Spodek, Howard. *The World's History, Third Edition*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006.
- Squatriti, Paolo. "How the Irish Sea (May Have) Saved Irish Civilization: A Review Article." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Jul., 2001), pp. 615-630. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Sweeney, James Johnson. *Irish illuminated manuscripts of the early Christian period*. London: Collins in association with Unesco, 1965.
- Thorp, Nigel. *The glory of the page: medieval & renaissance illuminated manuscripts from Glasgow University Library*. London: Glasgow University Library and the Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987.

Web

Centre for Manx Studies. *University of Liverpool School of Archaeology, Classics, and Egyptology*.

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/ManxStudies/>

Department of Prehistory and Europe. *The British Museum*.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/departments/prehistory_and_europe.aspx

Digital Scriptorium. *Columbia University Libraries*. <http://scriptorium.columbia.edu/>

Foundation for Critical Thinking. <http://www.criticalthinking.org/>

Humanities and Humanistic Studies. *The Virtual Library*. <http://vlib.org/Humanities>

Internet Medieval Sourcebook. *Fordam University*.

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/Sbook.html>

The Labyrinth: Resources for Medieval Studies. *Georgetown University*.

<http://labyrinth.georgetown.edu/>

Manx National Heritage. *National Heritage Agency of the Isle of Man*. <http://www.gov.im/mnh/>

Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organization (MEMO):

<http://medievalelectronicmultimedia.org/index.html>

Mullens, H.G. "Illustrations from the Classics from Mann." *Greece and Rome*, Vol. 9 No. 26.

10 Feb. 1940. Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Classical Association. Web.

1 March 2010.

Netserf: The Online Connection for Medieval Resources. <http://www.netserf.org/>

Owen, James. "'Humans Sped to U.K. After Ice Age.'" *National Geographic News*. 3 Nov.

2003. Web. 5 Mar. 2010. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/pf/74808342.html>

Reynolds, Susan. "The Emergence of Professional Law in the Long Twelfth Century." *Law*

and History Review Vol. 21, Issue 2. Retrieved 29 July 2009. www.historycooperative.org

Sharp, Tom. Review of J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics*, Ed. Michael D.C. Drout.

Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies. Published on *Medieval Forum*. Tuma, George and Dinah Hazell, eds. San Francisco State University.

<http://www.sfsu.edu/~medieval/Volume5/Beowulf.html>

TEAMS: *The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages*. <http://www.teamsmedieval.org/>

The Once and Future Classroom: Resources for Teaching the Middle Ages in Grades K-12.

TEAMS: *The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages*.

<http://www.teamsmedieval.org/ofc/index.htm>

Farming dates way back into Irish history. In the olden days, the ownership of cattle was considered to be a status symbol. When it comes to farming, the males handle most activities that are related to it. Women are known to market some of the produce. In the past, agriculture was always the primary profession of a common man, and men handled most of the affairs connected with the job. It is commonly believed that green symbolizes the natural green landscape of the country, and wearing the color is considered as giving tribute to the nation. It is also believed that green symbolizes the shamrock, which was the sign of St. Patrick. In fact there is even a tradition of pinching people who forget to wear green on St. Patrick's Day. Modern Irish Culture. The regular secondary schools offer 7 years of schooling, with students from 11 to 18 years of age. The last two years (16-18) may be spent in a separate sixth form college, which concentrates on career training. In 1988, for the first time in British history, a National Curriculum was introduced. The National Curriculum tells pupils which subjects they have to study, what they must learn and when they have to take assessment tests. Between the ages of 14 and 16, pupils study for their GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams. Pupils must take English Language, Math, and Science Roman culture was assimilated with the indigenous culture, and the culture of the conquerors emerged strongest. The Celts learned many things from the Romans but the Romans also learned a great deal from the Celts. For example, the Romans took much of their knowledge of wheeled transport (and much of the terminology of chariot-making) from the Celts, and the Celts adopted features of classical art and incorporated it into their own art. The Romans were also responsible for the near obliteration of Celtic culture in Britain. The history of the English literature. The text of Lectures. Bachelor's Department 5120100-Philology. Very few traces of the original Celtic culture can be found in Modern English, its structure and grammar being totally Germanic or Teutonic. The Anglo-Saxons brought their own folklore from their mother country and therefore early Anglo-Saxon poetry tells of the events, which took place on the continent. Together with the sea-witch Beowulf sank into the water of the swamp. His warriors remained on the bank to wait for him. Many hours had passed before Beowulf appeared. Secondary curriculum, key stage 3 and key stage 4 (GCSEs). GCSE subject content and requirements. Statutory guidance. National curriculum in England: history programmes of study. The statutory programmes of study and attainment targets for history for key stages 1 to 3. Published 11 September 2013. From Schools are not required by law to teach the example content in [square brackets] or the content indicated as being "non-statutory". Short films of teachers and subject experts talking about the national curriculum and how to use it are also available. Published 11 September 2013. Brexit transition.