

Through kinship with Spain, how did Ireland negotiate its cultural, religious and historical legitimacy in the face of colonialism, contributing to the emergence of an Irish national consciousness?

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Introduction

This essay examines Ireland's mythical relationship with Spain in the medieval, early modern, and modern periods to negotiate cultural, religious and historical legitimacy. In the medieval period, Ireland faced biblical anonymity and territorial encroachment, to which the text *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* was the solution. In the early modern period, Geoffrey Keating and his contemporaries weaponised this origin story against English accusations of barbarism and religious lapse. In modernity, as sectarian divisions gave way to broader national consciousness, the Spanish element of the myth dwindled – but the mythic framework itself endured, becoming the foundation for Irish nationalism. Across all three periods, the idea of kinship with Spain served not as a static legend but as a living, adaptable instrument of identity.

Medieval Period

Lebor Gabála Éirenn (*LGÉ*) or 'The Book of Invasions' is the basis of my research. The eleventh-century compilation draws on oral legends and historical poems, creating the supposed history of Ireland.¹ Retellings of *LGÉ* bolstered Ireland's cultural memory through reviving centuries-old legends.² *LGÉ* was written at a time when Irish replaced Latin as the language of scholarship.³ It was clerical compilers who selected which tales would be remembered by history; thus, religion was central. There was a great need for the creation of *LGÉ*, a source that included all biblical, native and classical sources known to Irish scholars.⁴ It was important for the Irish to educate themselves about their own biblically-based Irish myth.⁵ Ireland's presentation as a Catholic country with rich ancient roots to Spain became key during periods of invasion and the Reformation.

Modern definitions of history are not synonymous with those of medieval writers, who "regularly shaped stories about the past involving blatantly artificial narratives and genealogies".⁶ However, this difference from the modern understanding does not make these texts any less important. Today, due to its fictitious incorporation of Irish origin myth within a biblical framework, *LGÉ* would be classed as a pseudohistory - false accounts of the past but with a feel of genuine historical research – despite many medieval authors and readers not believing it was false. Beginning with the Creation story, *LGÉ* provides the genealogy of the children of Adam, stating that "Seth, the third son of Adam, is the ancestor of all the men of the world",⁷ following this family line until

¹ Lindy Brady, *The Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 60.

² Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* (Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 75.

³ Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, p. 75.

⁴ Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, p. 75.

⁵ Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating: History, Myth and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Ireland* (Four Courts Press, 2000), p. 111.

⁶ Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, p. 75.

⁷ R. A. Stewart Macalister, ed. and trans., *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, vol. 1 (Educational Company of Ireland, 1938), p. 1.

we reach Japhet, the son of Noah, who settled in Europe following the Great Flood. *LGÉ* asserts that “We Gaedil are descended from Japhet”,⁸ placing Ireland within an invented biblical framework. *LGÉ* is not only fascinating because it is a collection of facts about Ireland’s origins, but also because it highlights Irish society’s transformation through centuries of writers whose differing interpretations of *LGÉ* met the political and societal needs of the time.

Biblical history is at the heart of *LGÉ*. As early as the 400s, Christianity was in Ireland, though it is impossible to pinpoint in which year it fully converted.⁹ However, by 600 Ireland converted on a hierarchical and institutional level, heralding “considerable economic, intellectual and social changes”.¹⁰ What we know about medieval Ireland comes from the learned classes, whose primary source for ancient history was the Bible, and here we encounter a problem: the Bible contained no reference to the peoples of Ireland. This omission led to the creation of *LGÉ*. The parallelism utilised in *LGÉ* is “too close to be accidental”,¹¹ with the Old Testament’s genealogical tract replaced by characters *LGÉ* wishes to perpetuate as Ireland’s biblical ancestors. The resemblance is uncanny, notwithstanding the replacement of Shem for Japhet and the later substitution of the “two wives and the numerous sons of Jacob”¹² for the “two wives and numerous sons of Míl”¹³ - the final race to settle in Ireland. *LGÉ* was recognised as “a national myth which sought to put Ireland on the same footing as Israel and Rome”.¹⁴

LGÉ abounds with religious and biblical allusions, with constant genealogical reminders at the mention of “the children of Noe [Noah]”, who were “divided and parted the earth between them after the Flood”, including the biblical ancestors who populated Ireland. Although the focus was to preserve ancient pre-Christian history, *LGÉ*’s scribes were monastic, so it is no surprise the material is pious. Authors wrote medieval manuscripts and texts which met their patron’s needs by presenting the past in a way that supported their ambitions. Over time, *LGÉ* has been used by antiquarians, historians, nationalists and colonisers alike to emphasise prehistoric events that aligned with their own sense of self and identity. In the medieval era, the need to emphasise legitimacy and identity was essential during English encroachment on Irish lands, particularly during the reigns of Richard II and Henry IV of England, when claims over lands west of the Shannon threatened the power of already established hierarchical families. Thus, it is easy to see why asserting one’s legitimacy through long genealogical tracts at the beginning of manuscripts was a key tool for Irish nobles to defend their property and, ultimately, their way of life.

⁸ Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 1: p. 1.

⁹ Williams, *Ireland’s Immortals*, p. 19.

¹⁰ Edel Bhreathnach, “Communities and their Landscapes,” in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, ed. Brendan Smith, general ed. Thomas Bartlett, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 19.

¹¹ Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 1: p. xxvii.

¹² Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 1: p. xxvii.

¹³ Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 1: p. xxvii.

¹⁴ John Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory* (University of Cambridge, 1994), p. 4.

The written language of a text provides deep insight into the politics of the time. The eleventh-century Irish literary revival placed religion centre stage, as ‘senchas’ or old tales, combining Irish and Christian tradition, were believed in as steadfastly as the Bible.¹⁵ Establishing Ireland as a Christian centre was crucial in the Middle Ages. The religious centre of Clonmacnoise was “bestowed ‘fifty sicles of silver’”¹⁶ by Charlemagne. This link to the ‘Father of Europe’ elevated Ireland to the same level as other contemporary Christian nations. Though recognition from Charlemagne asserted Ireland’s worth, *LGÉ* and its depictions of Ireland as “the Promised Land”¹⁷ gave Ireland its “biblical pedigree”.¹⁸

Personal validation was also of enormous importance, with genealogy being the other key factor in the creation of *LGÉ*. In medieval Ireland, power and claims to land were legitimised through manuscripts reciting long lines of ancestors gone before. This was fundamental to the workings of power and hierarchy in medieval Ireland.¹⁹ Older copies of *LGÉ* typically commenced with “an account of the creation of the world; of the origin and history of the Ghaels, their language”,²⁰ which always included God creating “man in his own image”,²¹ endowing him with a soul. *LGÉ* purports “to tell of prehistoric times in Ireland and the successive arrival of peoples like the Parthalonians, the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha Da Danann and the Milesians”.²² The Milesians supposedly sailed from Iberia to Ireland, conquered the land and became the ancestors of the modern peoples of Ireland. Their association with the Near East through marriage and tales of departure from “Egypt, and Scythia, and Spain, until they arrived in Erin”,²³ reaffirmed the biblical origins of Ireland and emphasised its people’s honourable origins.²⁴ This is not the only link to Spain. Milesian is of Spanish origin, relating to ‘Míl Espáne’, whose name in Latin means ‘soldier of Hispania’, and whose sons conquered Ireland.²⁵ This callback to Spain is a common theme throughout and further emphasised during times of encroachment onto Irish land or culture.

We must question why Ireland was so keen to create or exaggerate links to Spain. In asking that question, I find three key responses. The first of which is due to a lack of geographical knowledge, which created the belief that travel from Spain was logistically feasible. Orosius was an Iberian historian and theologian who described Ireland as between Britain and Spain, claiming that Spain was visible from the mouth of

¹⁵ David Greene, “Leabhar na hUidhre”, in *Great Books of Ireland: Thomas Davis Lectures* (Clonmore & Reynolds; Burns & Oates, 1967), p. 67.

¹⁶ Michael Slavin, *The Ancient Books of Ireland* (Wolfhound Press, 2005), p. 10.

¹⁷ Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 1: p. xxvii.

¹⁸ Clíodhna Ní Lionáin, “Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Use and Appropriation of an Irish Origin Legend in Identity Construction at Home and Abroad,” *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 27, no. 2 (2012): p. 36.

¹⁹ Williams, *Ireland’s Immortals*, p. 83.

²⁰ Owen Connellan, *Leabhar Gabhála: Transcript and Translation*, Royal Irish Academy MS 4 A. 26, nineteenth century, p. 2.

²¹ Connellan, *Leabhar Gabhála*, p. 4.

²² Slavin, *Ancient Books of Ireland*, p. 15.

²³ Connellan, *Leabhar Gabhála*, p. 36.

²⁴ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 124.

²⁵ Carey, *Irish National Origin-Legend*, p. 10.

the river Scena (the River Shannon).²⁶ The second answer is that when medieval texts speak of 'Spain', it was less about a specific nation, but an ambiguous overseas territory. This ties into the Hispano-Roman encyclopaedist Isidore of Seville's description of Spain as the "mother of races",²⁷ placing the nation at the epicentre of humanity. He also incorrectly connected the Latin for Ireland, 'Hibernia', with (H)Iberia because of its similar spelling. In this instance, 'Hibernia' and Iberia stem from completely different etymological roots. However, etymology was extremely important to medieval audiences, and it became a field in which incorrect connections were continuously drawn. The final answer, and the one most central to my research, is the Christian perspective that these origin stories reflect the two nations as learned - and most importantly, Christian - centres of Europe. In the case of Ireland's biblical anonymity, with little to no reference to their existence in key Christian sources, how could a newly converted country justify itself as a Christian nation? It had to find or create an origin for itself within a biblical framework, and so *LGÉ* came to be. *LGÉ*'s significant biblical history more closely associates Ireland with Christianity; it made sense to associate with well-established Christian Spain.²⁸

LGÉ is a pillar of medieval Ireland, becoming popular as soon as it was written. Yet the difference between *LGÉ* and a modern-day Sunday Times bestseller is that it has maintained popularity for centuries by being recopied and expanded several times in the first few decades of existence.²⁹ For modern Irish society to still hold a flame for such an old text speaks to its transformation across time, shifting throughout the centuries to meet the political needs of the time. Though different recensions of *LGÉ* agree overall on the origins they present, what they say differs drastically.³⁰ The variety of versions of *LGÉ* has enabled generations of readers to empathise with it and withstand the test of time.

The marvel of *LGÉ* to have prevailed into modernity highlights the ingenuity of Ireland's learned classes who built history upon such slight foundations.³¹ The need for such an elaborate origin story for Ireland calls back to the question of what a link to Spain provided Ireland. The link with Spain provided Noahic descent and glorious ancestry to the Milesians, immersing Ireland in a biblical world and establishing its ancient right to rule.³² This need to establish their ancient right to rule was due to the constant English challenging of Irish power. Though Spain and Ireland converted to Christianity early on, there was a key difference between the two nations. Spain was intellectually an integral part of Christian Europe, producing writers as important and ubiquitous in Ireland as Isidore of Seville and Orosius. However, Ireland lay on the fringes of Europe as an isolated and decentralised Christian nation. Although these genealogical links may not be true, they were carefully constructed for societal needs of the time, such as closer association with Biblical origins or Christianity in general. Ultimately, it would be remiss

²⁶ Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 1: p. xxxi.

²⁷ Brady, *Origin Legends*, pp. 49-50

²⁸ Brady, *Origin Legends*, p. 48.

²⁹ Carey, *Irish National Origin-Legend*, p. 22.

³⁰ Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 1: p. ix.

³¹ Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, p. 78.

³² Ní Lionáin, "Lebor Gábala Éirenn," p. 44.

to judge *LGÉ* by foreign or modern standards, as it was written to address a specific Irish need: to develop history which would allow collaboration between native tradition and the Latin learning introduced by the Church.³³

Early Modern Period

New identities flourished in the sixteenth century, creating new reactions to past scholarship. Importantly, origin legends developed into individual nationalistic narratives of history.³⁴ Individual religion meant each early-modern English ruler presented different challenges or opportunities for Ireland. Protestant King Charles I was married to Queen Henrietta Maria, a devout Catholic. While Charles I was trying to ensure support from the French, he could not appear to be persecuting their fellow Catholics in Ireland; as such, at least on the surface, the suppression of Catholics eased up.³⁵ His reign presented a Catholic ‘opening’ for the Irish. *LGÉ* created “echoes of the present in the Irish past”,³⁶ seen in *LGÉ*’s adapted inclusion of the Stuart dynasty during this Irish ‘opening’. In the early reign of King James I, some Irish poets encouraged the Stuart kingdom of Ireland by proliferating the Stuarts as notable in Milesian origin tales.³⁷ These works were written for specific patrons, and their beliefs cannot be attributed to all Irish Catholics; undoubtedly, varying views were held regarding such matters.³⁸ Regardless, *LGÉ* was a pillar from which origin tales could be quickly curated and established for the current political climate. Stuart kings were given the highest pedigree, asserting they were of the race of Éibhear, related to the Milesians, placing British rulers within the genealogical tract of Ireland’s mythical kings.³⁹ By linking the Stuart dynasty to Ireland’s ancient kings, this genealogy gave British claims to Ireland an Irish dynastic basis while simultaneously reinforcing the Irish claim to the land as the ancestral inheritance of that same royal lineage. Associating Stuart kings with the heroes of Ireland’s mythical past does not prove that everyone in Ireland viewed British claims to Ireland as legitimate. It highlights that for some Irish Catholics, religion was their key marker of identity. Aligning with Charles I to assert their faith and right to inhabit Ireland highlights how, despite being head of the Protestant Church of England, he was clearly seen as Catholic enough, or at least sympathetic enough to Catholics, to warrant their allegiance.⁴⁰

Geoffrey Keating’s works provide insight into early-modern religion. Keating, an Irish priest and preacher, is renowned for his book, *ForasFeasa ar Éirinn*, which sought to set straight the ‘lies’ presented by New English writers, aiming to “give Ireland a history it

³³ Carey, *Irish National Origin-Legend*, p. 24.

³⁴ Brady, *Origin Legends*, p. 118.

³⁵ Eugene O’Curry, ed. and trans., *Cath Mhuighe Léana, or, The Battle of Magh Leana: Together with Tochmarc Moméra, or The Courtship of Momera* (The Celtic Society, 1855), p. 178.
https://codecs.vanhamel.nl/Tochmarc_Moméra.

³⁶ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 7.

³⁷ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 7.

³⁸ Isabelle Torrance, ed., *Irish Migrations and Classical Antiquity* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2026), p. 15.

³⁹ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 126.

⁴⁰ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 108.

could be proud of”.⁴¹ Completed in c.1634, his writing preserved ‘Irishness’ as he saw it, as *LGÉ* was heavily used to weave together history, myth and religion into a unified history of the Irish people.⁴² Keating’s intended audience is revealed in the language in which his text was written. His pride in the Irish language cannot be overlooked and is essential to relay his message to the Irish people.⁴³ English replaced the Irish language in certain circumstances amongst elites as early as the 1620s. Yet the Irish-written *Foras Feasa* was readily understood by his audience, ensuring the story of Ireland would not be lost on its people.⁴⁴ It was of the utmost importance amid “a seventeenth-century world of dissension between native and newcomer”⁴⁵ that the Irish language remained a pillar of identity.

Keating’s work sought to establish the Irish people. However, their challenge was not the biblical anonymity they had faced in the medieval period; rather, refuting British claims of a backward nation and of barbarism. It is no wonder *Foras Feasa* drew greatly from *LGÉ*, as it provided Ireland with an ancient and civilised ancestry.⁴⁶ Keating refuted claims the Irish were “ignorant of all the virtues”,⁴⁷ providing a valuable interpretation of Ireland for its people, while denouncing claims of barbarity. A Tudor and Stuart metaphor of barbarity was a version of Homer’s *Odyssey* and Circe’s Cup. Those writers “asserted that Irish culture, like Circe’s potion, had the power to turn the English into degenerates”,⁴⁸ exaggerating the line between English colonists and native Irish. However, most issues arose from the writers Gerard of Wales (c.1146-c.1223) and Edmund Spenser (1552 -1599). Accusations included “cannibalism, of soldiers bathing in the blood of their victims, of contracts being sealed by mutual drinking of blood”,⁴⁹ which Keating labelled entirely ignorant, only to be excused as poetic “license of invention”.⁵⁰ Such vile comments motivated Keating to set the record straight and no longer denigrate the name Ireland. While on the Continent, Keating learned of Catholic histories of other nations on which to base his own ‘History of Ireland’ (*Foras Feasa*). He wished to prove that “if only indeed they had given their proper estimate to the Irish, I know not why they should not put them in comparison with any nation in Europe in three things, namely, in valour, in learning, and in being steadfast in the Catholic faith”.⁵¹ This perfectly summarises Keating’s hopes and ambitions for Ireland. As a priest, he had real insight into Catholic Ireland and how truly learned and unwavering in their faith people were. Keating’s solution to claims of barbarity was to emphasise the original Old and Middle Irish narratives (like *LGÉ*). Keating saw how crucial it was who recorded a country’s history, and how, in Ireland’s case, no foreign person nor language could truly capture its mythological origins, or the early modern unwavering religion.

⁴¹ O’Curry, *Cath Mhuighe Léana*, pp. 190-191

⁴² Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 9.

⁴³ Ian Stewart, *The Celts: A Modern History* (Princeton University Press, 2025), p. 56.

⁴⁴ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 131.

⁴⁶ Ní Lionáin, “Lebor Gábala Érenn,” p. 36.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Keating, *The History of Ireland, from the Earliest Period to the English Invasion*, trans. John O’Mahony (P. M. Haverty, 1857), p. 11.

⁴⁸ Torrance, *Irish Migrations*, p. 15.

⁴⁹ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 116.

⁵⁰ Keating, *History of Ireland*, p. 31.

⁵¹ Keating, *History of Ireland*, pp. 77-79.

The Noahic descent of the Milesians was emphasised in early modern versions of *LGÉ*, including Mícheál Ó Cléirigh. Cléirigh's recension of *LGÉ* speaks of travel between Spain and Ireland in a biblical setting. "Twenty days they had thence to the Alps, eighteen days from the Alps to Spain. Nine days from Spain to Ireland. A Saturday, they reached Ireland in the fifteenth day of the moon".⁵² This recorded travel speaks to the medieval theory that those who created the links between Ireland and Spain believed travel between the two nations was feasible. Reaching Ireland on "the fifteenth day of the moon"⁵³ can be interpreted by medieval folklore and 'lunaria' (moon-books) as a full moon, symbolising completion and cosmic harmony, highlighting how medieval scribes would use precise lunar knowledge to legitimise Irish origins within biblical time.⁵⁴ This highlights the medieval and early modern ability to shape myth to align with political, social, and, in this case, religious needs.

The English Reformation reached Ireland in the 1530s and shaped identities for centuries to come. In Stuart Ireland, historical legitimacy was essential to establish necessary cohesion among the Irish Catholic population.⁵⁵ The Reformation not only changed religious identities, but also ideological ones. As Ireland's native history began to be embraced, the predominant approach to history was genealogical.⁵⁶ Tracing migrations and conquests endowed the Irish with prestigious pedigrees.⁵⁷ However, mythical prestigious pedigrees were soon replaced by a focus on Irish rather than foreign roots due to a "crystallising sense of nationhood".⁵⁸ Connections to Spain in medieval Milesian stories helped Ireland escape the biblical anonymity they feared, proving themselves a Christian nation. Previously, Celtic lineage was rejected in deference to genealogies drawn from Iberians or Egyptians.⁵⁹ The Renaissance led to the recovery of long-forgotten ancient sources and the circulation of these new ideas around Europe. The Celtic identity was one such concept that began to be embraced. The new trend of emphasising the history of individual nations contrasted with the previous preference for universal chronicles.⁶⁰ Encouraging individual historical roots increased perceptions of distinct nations and kingdoms and developed a national conscience. The past was "put to increasingly nationalistic purposes"⁶¹, and genealogy was central to the construction of this past. Genealogy is what survives of the peoples of Ireland whose voices we can no longer hear, who were silenced by society, unable to be remembered like noble families or heroic figures. People are fascinated by their nation's genealogy as it is the one thing history remembers for all, and, in modern times when Irish migration is high, it unites people.

⁵² Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister, and Eoin Mac Neill, *Leabhar Gabhála = The Book of Conquests of Ireland*, vol. 1 (Hodges, Figgis, 1916), p. 11.

⁵³ Ó Cléirigh, Macalister, and Mac Neill, *Leabhar Gabhála*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ Medievalists.net, "The Moon in the Middle Ages," December 16, 2023, <https://www.medievalists.net/2023/12/moon-middle-ages/>.

⁵⁵ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 41.

⁵⁷ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 41.

⁵⁸ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 40.

⁵⁹ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 57.

⁶⁰ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 108.

⁶¹ Brady, *Origin Legends*, p. 204.

The response to the Reformation was the Counter-Reformation. The English monarchy continued enforcing Protestantism in Ireland, to little avail, as the majority rejected it. Instead, Catholicism was revitalised, mainly due to the return of priests who had studied and practised on the Continent, including Geoffrey Keating. Keating blended Counter-Reformation Catholic ideology with traditional Irish scholarship.⁶² Gaelic language was not fully explored as a form of resistance until the early seventeenth century. In the 1620s, there existed “the beginnings of a consciousness among the learned classes of the need to value the Irish language”.⁶³ This mirrored the growing awareness that English was threatening the Irish language. Michael Kearney, first translator of *Foras Feasa*, stated that as the language of law and government, English granted social mobility as “the more respected language”.⁶⁴ Though translating texts into English had its benefits - mainly wider circulation and audience - *Foras Feasa*, written in Irish, conveyed Keating’s sentiments word for word to a smaller, curated audience. Readers of the translated work had much of the nuance lost on them.

Nonetheless, Counter-Reformation Catholic doctrines benefited from wider circulation. The modern format made their ideas and history of Ireland more accessible.⁶⁵ This more accessible history of Ireland enabled a small group of migrants to take advantage of their mythical relationship with Spain. Significant migration occurred due to encroaching English settlers’ plantations – made of confiscated land from Native Irish and Old English rewarded to British settlers. The displaced sought refuge in Spain, frequently referring to Milesian myths in petitions for support.⁶⁶ Taking advantage of supposed Spanish kinship to garner Spanish military support and reclaim seized lands is a great example of *LGE* being adapted to fit modern purposes. Gaelic chieftains were unsuccessful in gaining Spanish Military support. However, other efforts, especially by this learned class, succeeded, with Irish colleges established in Spain to educate young Catholic Irishmen. Educating these young minds furthered their Irish national conscience on their return from the Continent. These established colleges were quick to emphasise the Milesian origin story when seeking financial aid from their Spanish keepers, keenly reiterating their moral obligation to support fellow Milesian descendants.⁶⁷ The Irish College of Salamanca was one such institution that accentuated the connection, as it petitioned King Philip III of Spain to grant a home by retelling the story of the famed Irish hospitality they had once shown the Spanish in the mythical past.⁶⁸ Bernadette Cunningham noted Keating had a “clear eye to the significance of ... Spanish links with the Ireland of his own day”.⁶⁹ Similarly, Eugene O’Curry recognises Keating’s appreciation of the myths and national struggle of his homeland, noting him “a man fighting for a nation’s soul, and time has proven that he

⁶² Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, pp. 6-7.

⁶³ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 129.

⁶⁴ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 129.

⁶⁵ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 129.

⁶⁶ Ní Lionáin, “Lebor Gábala Érenn,” p. 36.

⁶⁷ Ní Lionáin, “Lebor Gábala Érenn,” p. 37.

⁶⁸ Ní Lionáin, “Lebor Gábala Érenn,” p. 37.

⁶⁹ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 140.

won the battle”.⁷⁰ This emphasises the special place the relationship between Ireland and Spain held in his mind and the hearts of its people.

Foras Feasa presents Ireland with a nationalistic tone common in early modern works incorporating *LGÉ*. However, Keating’s “definition of ‘Éireannaigh’ was exclusive rather than inclusive in that Catholicism was a prerequisite”.⁷¹ Keating’s religious exclusion was intended to meet the needs of his Catholic congregation audience. Regardless, by the end of the early-modern period, his work came to be valued by diverse communities.⁷² This expanded audience speaks to ever-changing identities, as there was a slow shift away from religious identity to ethnicity as paramount.

Foras Feasa asserts Ireland is a Catholic nation, and that any other nation claiming otherwise is gravely misinformed. British writers who circulated these misinterpretations of the Irish did so to support English claims of sovereignty over Ireland.⁷³ On the surface, England’s concern was the salvation of the Irish people. However, its goal of a reformed church and eagerness for military conquest suggested salvation was a lesser concern. The twelfth-century papal bull *Laudabiliter* purportedly transferred sovereignty of Ireland to Henry II, instructing the English king to reform faith in Ireland.⁷⁴ It was granted by Pope Adrian IV, who was misinformed that “faith had lapsed in Ireland”.⁷⁵ For Keating, this was entirely false, rebutting with a “series of proofs that the Irish were steadfast in the Catholic faith, based on the many abbeys, pilgrimages, and religious councils of the Irish”.⁷⁶ Thus, *Foras Feasa*’s importance for Irish self-conception cannot be understated. It refutes claims that Christianity ever lapsed in Ireland, thus cancelling those claims of British legitimacy over Ireland.

Modern Period

Despite the centuries between modernity and the Middle Ages, *LGÉ* and its recensions have found a place in the national conscience. The “versatility of the underlying scheme, and enthusiasm with which it [*LGÉ*] was adopted and developed by generation after generation of historians, antiquaries, poets and storytellers”⁷⁷ speaks volumes about its transformative qualities and ability to remain relevant. Irish nationalism prevalent in the nineteenth century was built upon the work of early modern antiquarians. Though the intent of antiquarians was not to ignite “political agitation”,⁷⁸ their presentation of a distinguished and ancient Ireland only further developed Irish perception of themselves in the nineteenth century. “Scholars cleared the ground in the 1830s for the triumph of a Celtic origin story, which acquired a political hue in the 1840s as politicians and history became radicalised”.⁷⁹ Clare

⁷⁰ O’Curry, *Cath Mhuighe Léana*, p. 191

⁷¹ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 9.

⁷² Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 11.

⁷³ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 51.

⁷⁴ Carey, *Irish National Origin-Legend*, p. 95.

⁷⁵ Carey, *Irish National Origin-Legend*, p. 95.

⁷⁶ Carey, *Irish National Origin-Legend*, p. 95.

⁷⁷ Carey, *Irish National Origin-Legend*, p. 24.

⁷⁸ Ní Lionáin, “Lebor Gábala Érenn,” p. 38.

⁷⁹ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 246.

O'Halloran agrees that antiquarianism “laid the cultural basis for nineteenth-century Irish nationalism”.⁸⁰ These individuals prided themselves on their nationally conscious sponsored works, rediscovering stories that explained their ancestors’ past struggles, and adapted those same tales to suit modern ideals.⁸¹ It is here we see the emergence of a modern Irish national conscience. *LGÉ* was deeply rooted in modernity; however, aspects that medieval Ireland heavily emphasised to defend their identity – such as Milesian origins and ties to Spain in general – began to dwindle, making room for the promotion of “Ireland’s glorious past and independent sovereignty, rather than its Iberian beginnings”.⁸² The “origin myth was used exclusively in an Irish political context, the Spanish element diminished in importance”.⁸³ However, Ireland was not rewriting and glossing over its mythical past, but selecting the elements that furthered its modern goals.

Ireland still very much remained a Catholic country, but after the Reformation, identity became more politically and culturally charged. Despite being early modern, Keating’s *Foras Feasa* still stands as an example of conflict in Ireland shifting from Catholic versus Protestant to Ireland versus England. Keating’s new sense of Irishness gained traction, quickly becoming the accepted version of Ireland’s past, locally for his Catholic followers and nationally among Catholics of his generation.⁸⁴ Soon Protestant Ireland adopted Keating’s *Foras Feasa* too. Over time, the origin stories presented by Keating gained favour with all whose sense of Irishness had “political or cultural importance regardless of their religious affiliation”.⁸⁵ It was due to growing discontent with England that Anglo-Irish Protestants adopted Gaelic history as their own.⁸⁶ And it was on the ground of this Irish affinity that Catholic and Protestant Gaels saw eye to eye on the bigger picture of Irish national identity.

The early modern invention of the printing press, central to the Protestant Reformation, was a phenomenon like no other, enabling ideas to be shared among like-minded educated peers. Catholic scribes continued to copy Irish manuscripts well into the 19th century, and for the illiterate population, sharing such ideas was enormously difficult. However, by modernity, printed translations were more available, and literacy rates were higher, allowing all to educate themselves on political matters. Dermot O’Connor’s 1723 translation of Keating’s *Foras Feasa* was deliberately tailored to non-Catholic audiences because of the demand for Keating’s history of Ireland by the descendants of the New English: British and English Protestant settlers who arrived in Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸⁷ *Foras Feasa* was designed as a history of Ireland for his Catholic brethren, seen in his constant incorporation of faith. Similarly, *LGÉ* was written by the clergy not just to confirm Ireland’s myths, but to provide security in a world of biblical anonymity. Both were designed with Christianity at their core. However, each slowly transformed to meet Ireland’s needs to the point that

⁸⁰ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 217.

⁸¹ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 216.

⁸² Ní Lionáin, “Lebor Gábala Érenn,” p. 40.

⁸³ Ní Lionáin, “Lebor Gábala Érenn,” p. 40.

⁸⁴ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 8.

⁸⁵ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 8.

⁸⁶ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 238.

⁸⁷ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 225.

religion was superseded by national identity, and it was at this point that the myths of *LGÉ* claimed their place in the national conscience of modern Ireland. As sentiments of nationalism continued to brew, by the early eighteenth century, New English Protestant descendants viewed Ireland as their homeland, eager to buy the “political idea of Ireland as a distinct kingdom”.⁸⁸ The alignment of New English with Irish identity rather than English saw them face consequences, being “tarred with the same brush as the native Irish”.⁸⁹ This xenophobic display increased, as modern ‘Penal Laws’ clamped down on rebellious religious practices that did not align with the English Crown. This highlights the English perception of the Irish shifting, with the respect they gave the New English Protestants not afforded to their descendants because their generation formed a nationally based identity rather than a religious one, speaking to the wider movement of the time.

The ‘Irish Question’ refers to a much-discussed subject in nineteenth-century British politics. While on paper Ireland joined Britain in the 1800 Act of the Union, in practice the relationship between Britain and Ireland was strained due to discontent on both sides. This made the perfect breeding ground for xenophobic and racial prejudices to form. Ireland was viewed as a subordinate rather than equal within the Union, “intellectually and physically relegated to the ‘fringes’ of Western Europe, as apparent victims of political impotence and racial prejudice”.⁹⁰ Britain was rife with “anti-Celtic racial prejudice that could not be distilled”.⁹¹ People were quick to form these prejudices, which stubbornly remained in the conscience of Britain until relatively recent times. Today, the Irish are famed as a merry people adored across the globe. Yet just a few generations earlier than my own, the Irish were regarded with such disdain that signs across England would read ‘No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish’. My great-grandmother sobbed at the news that my mother was immigrating to England, due to the mistreatment she herself had faced during her time in England in the 1950s. However, opinions change from generation to generation. Now, when my mother attends meetings or dinners and the topic of immigration is raised, with hatred and prejudice voiced, her own immigration is glossed over and sidelined: “Oh not you Áine, you’re not like them”. People are quick to forget that mere decades earlier the same hatred now directed at modern immigrants was directed towards the Irish. Migration is at the heart of Irish identity, with economic opportunities spurring emigration from all social classes for centuries.⁹² Most cases of Irish emigration were out of necessity, not desire. For such a small island, Ireland’s diaspora, those who live outside of their original homeland, is “ten times its resident population”.⁹³ Today, “one would be hard-pressed to find an Irish person unaffected by migration, either personally or through the emigration of family members”.⁹⁴ Undoubtedly, the concept of Irish identity and what it means to be Irish is entangled with migration, and this has been cemented across time. Migration is seen through the modern-day mass displacement of those who

⁸⁸ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 25.

⁸⁹ Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, p. 186.

⁹⁰ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 4.

⁹¹ Stewart, *Celts*, p. 261.

⁹² Torrance, *Irish Migrations*, p. 10.

⁹³ Torrance, *Irish Migrations*, p. 1.

⁹⁴ Torrance, *Irish Migrations*, p. 1.

identify as Irish around the world, but importantly, migration is also seen in the origin stories of how Ireland came to be. Ireland is a nation built upon migration, and it is important to emphasise that it is these stories of ancient immigration of mythical peoples that still echo across Irish culture today.

Conclusion

To conclude, the kinship Ireland claimed with Spain was never historical fact, but an invention, and that is precisely why it mattered. This essay has traced centuries of political and religious change and the remarkable elasticity of a single idea: that Ireland's deepest origins lie not in isolation but in kinship with Spain. That idea was false historically, yet provided legitimacy to the colonised, dignity to the denigrated and has shaped modern-day nationalism. At its heart, Ireland is a nation of migrants. Each wave of mythical people arrived from elsewhere, building their own Ireland on the shores of those who came before. The myths we keep retelling are not just records of where Ireland came from; they are proof of what Ireland has always been – a place shaped by those who arrived, who stayed, who left, and who returned in story if not in body. If such a small island on the fringes of Europe can forge a national identity from invented genealogies, the persistence of its language, and refusal to let another nation define it, then there is hope for every people still struggling to be seen – still fighting to be heard but still writing their own origin stories. Ireland's past is not a treasure to be guarded, but a torch to be passed.

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