

# The “Celtic family” – football, non-recognition and self-recognition in Scotland

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Joseph M. Bradley 2006 (ed.): *Celtic Minded 2. Essays on Celtic Football, Culture and Identity*. Argyll: Argyll. 288 pp., ISBN 1 902831 93 4, 15 Euro.

Rumours say that there exists something like Catholic football and Protestant football in post-religious Europe – Celtic and Rangers in Scotland. Are these only rumours, and why are there such rumours? We can enter the questions by this book giving an inner view of Celtic Football Club.

The story of the famous club from Glasgow can be read as a narrative, which leads from football to social relations around ethnicity, class, discrimination, charity and recognition. This is how the local and worldwide fans of the Glasgow-based professional club will read it – and also the academic community of sports research. However, the story can also be read the other way round, leading from identity conflict to sport. This is how the editor Joe Bradley, lecturer at the Department of Sports, University of Stirling, in his large introduction and academic-style main article approaches.

Scotland is known – or deserves to be known – for a rather unique profile in interethnic relations: Compared with other countries of Europe, Scottish society has shown least Anti-Semitism. As the only European country, Scotland has neither had organised attacks against Jews nor any state persecution of Jews.<sup>1</sup> Also recent racism directed against Asian and African immigration minorities has yet remained relatively limited – though it is alarming as such – and was continuously hampered by the Scottish myth of being “a tolerant people deep to the roots”. One is tempted to explain this inter-ethnic feature by the fact that another hostility has shadowed large parts of Scottish history and the current situation: anti-Englishness.

But there is a further problem, which is worth closer examination: the so-called sectarian conflict. Certain forms of Scottish Protestantism directed from time to time sharp religious-political aggression against the Irish Catholic minority. This violent antipapism with its racist undertones was described in the first volume of *Celtic Minded*.<sup>2</sup> Sectarianism exhibited a remarkable inner split of Scottish identity. A Scottish newspaper explained: “*Scotland has never hated Jews – it was too busy hating Catholics.*”<sup>3</sup>

## A non-recognized minority in the shadow of sectarianism

There lives a large minority of Irish people in Scotland today, immigrated mainly after the Great Famine in mid-nineteenth century’s Ireland. In a population of five millions, Scots of Irish family are numbered by 150.000 first and second generation migrants. But the Irish multi-generational minority as a whole is much larger. People of Irish heritage – either Catholic or Protestant – are estimated by one million or 20% of the population. While many individuals have assimilated to Scottish mainstream identity, the Irish minority makes up the vast majority of the 800.000 Catholics in Scotland, which is 15-16% of the population. And they form a large part of the 800.000 people of other-than-Scottish origin, among whom 100.000 – or 2% of the population – are Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Caribbean, African and other ‘non-whites’.

The Irish immigrants settled mostly as working-class people in and around Glasgow. They performed remarkable contributions to Scottish life, especially to the development of Scottish Labour and the political left wing, to social services, to culture – and to Scottish sports. From the Edinburgh Irish community emerged James Connolly who became a leader of the Easter Rising in Dublin 1916 and remains until today the most outstanding thinker of revolutionary socialism in Ireland.

But the Iro-Scottish minority has a problem. It is neglected in the media. When the Scottish Executive – the devolved government established in 1999 – launched a good-will campaign “One Scotland Many Cultures”, some of its documents referred only to non-white ethnics or spoke of Pakistanis as being the largest minority in Scotland. This meant implicitly not to recognise the existence of the large ‘white’ Irish minority. Anti-racism tended to stare itself blind on ‘black-white’ problems.

Also in milieus of academic research, as Bradley shows, there has been a striking neglect of this remarkable ethnic group. The presence and non-recognition of the Irish in Scotland poses an intellectual problem, challenging the conventional theories of racism, discrimination, and majority-minority relations. What is the relation between sectarianism, i.e. a hate-relation with religious background, and racism?

The sectarian conflict is not just a question of 'religion' - it has deeper roots in Scottish history and in current, 'post-religious' society. After Scotland had turned towards Reformation, some more fundamentalist denominations of Reformed Presbyterianism (Covenanters, Cameronians etc.) expressed social unrest and opposition against the British domination. British colonialism, however, used these militant Protestants for its politics of divide-et-impera against the inner-Scottish opposition of the Jacobites and Highlanders, but also against the Irish on the neighbour island. During the seventeenth century, the Irish province of Ulster was what we today would call 'ethnically cleansed' from their Catholic population and settled by Anglo-Scottish Protestant colonists. And during the nineteenth century, Scots were used as soldiers by British colonialism all over the world, in South Africa, Sudan, India... - against people who were far from being in conflict with the Scottish.

This history of colonisation had not only outward consequences - in the Anglo-Scottish plantation of Ulster where the Irish troubles continue. It had also inward consequences, inside Scottish identity.<sup>4</sup> The Scottish people lacked democratic representation under the Union and could feel un-free - and yet, they identified with their fight for the Empire. Imperial military monuments as well as historical museums in nowadays Scotland document an inner split - between Tartan-romantic Highlandism on one side and proud memory of British Imperialism on the other. Inner psychic identity troubles of this type would in the case of other nations have paved the ground for violent Anti-Semitism. This was not the case in Scotland.

The particular Scottish way was anti-Catholic sectarianism. In Glasgow in the 1790s, there lived no more than 39 Catholics in the city, but there existed 43 anti-Catholic societies. Later followed the large Irish Catholic immigration - and Protestant reactions. A peak was reached during the 1920/30s when the official Church of Scotland together with the United Free Church launched a campaign against the Catholics and demanded the deportation of this "inferior race" to Ireland. Anti-Catholic parties achieved remarkable electoral success at local level, although not only Labour and the Scottish Nationalists, but also the conservative Unionists and the Scottish press distanced themselves from the extremists. In nowadays society, the power of churches has decreased, and their anti-Catholic religious fervour lost influence on the Scottish people. However, there has remained a paradox: "*Scotland has ceased to be a Protestant country without ceasing to be anti-Catholic*", as Patrick Reilly (professor in Glasgow and also a contributor to this book) has pointed it.

### From religion to sports

Religion has left society - sectarianism remained. This is where sport enters the picture. Football furnished a new arena for sectarian conflict. Since the late nineteenth century, football in Scotland has been dominated by two professional clubs, Rangers and Celtic, both based in Glasgow - the so-called Old Firm.<sup>5</sup> Celtic was founded in 1887 by Brother Walfrid, an Irish monk who aimed at combining professional football with charity for the local Irish community. The club was under the patronage of the Archbishop of Glasgow and supported by Michael Davitt, the great Irish nationalist ('Fenian') and leader of the social-oppositional Irish Land League. In reaction, the Glasgow Rangers, founded in 1873, took a firmly Protestant and Unionist stand.

The tension between the two clubs had also a background of social class. The Celtic fans represented typically working class milieus while the Rangers recruited in the better-off pro-English bourgeoisie.

The conflict inside the Old Firm has lasted until today. While the Celtic fans sing 'Green' rebel songs from the Fenian (and IRA) tradition and use the Irish Shamrock as well as the Irish tricolore as symbols, the Rangers fans use songs of anti-Fenian, anti-Catholic character and other symbols from the 'Orange' tradition of Ulster Loyalism. It is remarkable that none of these football subcultures stands especially near to the Scottish nationalist cause.

There was not just symmetry in the Celtic/Rangers relation. While Celtic always was open for players of other religious or ethnic background, Rangers were exclusive in selecting Protestants as players and opened only since 1989 for Catholic players. And whilst the Rangers fans were known by their aggressive songs like "Billy Boys" ("*we're up to our knees in Fenian blood*"), the Celtic fans are regarded as mostly peaceful and got the fairness price of UEFA and FIFA. Nevertheless there happened riots between the two fan groups, and both sides finally recognised this as sectarian problem in their own camp. Both clubs joined in fight against "bigotry".

Recent observers have underlined that the sectarian relation inside the Old Firm should not be overstressed. Indeed, the two volumes of *Celtic Minded* include contributions from authors and Celtic supporters of Protestant and non-Irish background. Global commercialisation of the clubs has changed the picture, too. But also the recently growing "Tartan Army", the travelling supporters of the Scottish national football team, seems to bridge the inner-Scottish gap between Rangers and Celtic. The Tartan Army is a loose connection between Scottish supporters using extensively the national colours and flag, the Saltire, and consuming great quantities of alcohol. The Tartan fans compete for the title of being the "World's Friendliest Fans" - though they have also been suspected to have an anti-English agenda. Supporters from both clubs of the Old Firm have joined this activity.

What remains, however, is the inner coherence of "the Celtic family", as the player Neil Lennon calls it in his foreword of *Celtic Minded 2*. And there remain undertones of reproach, which

the book directs against continuing elements of sectarian hostility and against the non-recognition of the Irish minority.

### The actuality of sectarian discourse

Sectarian hostility topped with Rangers riots in Barcelona and Birmingham in the 1970s. These alarmed the public, but Scottish press often tried to balance this by referring to Celtic's symbols on the other side. Thus, symmetry was constructed where there was none. Later on, the riots calmed down, and yet, the volume *Celtic Minded 2* documents that the problems as such did not disappear. In 2003, in connection with the UEFA Cup Final in Seville, some Scottish commentators reacted after the well-known pattern. They expressed a personal feeling of being "*absolutely appalled and disgusted*" when seeing the Irish flags waved by Celtic-supporters. In 2004, when the Celtic player Aidan McGeady decided to play for the Irish national team, he was abused by opposition fans, and press commentators called him "disgraceful", a "traitor", and loyal to a "terrorist country". (Bradley documents the McGeady case in detail.) The Irish symbolism of Celtic "*turns my stomach*", a Scottish journalist wrote, and: it "*makes my blood boil*", another commented - both expressing thus, how deep 'in the body' their hostility rooted. In 2005, the case of the Irish-born Celtic captain Neil Lennon became spectacular. (Irene A Reid from the Department of Sports, University of Stirling, describes this case in detail.) When Lennon in a highly emotional situation reacted uncontrolled against two match officials, tabloid papers and popular radio became enraged and demonised the man according to the racist pattern. Media constructed the picture of "*a demented animal... snarling, snorting... ugly actions of a back-street thug*" - a public enemy.

The commercial interest of the tabloid press - to sell more newspapers by constructing a case and a campaign - exploited and enforced the existing sectarian potentials. This commercial factor means that also - and maybe especially - in a 'secularised' society one has to take voices of ethno-religious hate into account. It seems as if football had occupied the place, which once had been taken by Presbyterian churches. Sport is a field of post-religious conflict - maybe football as a practical ritual has post-religious dimensions in itself.

One of the authors hints at the implied problem of defining the religious. He tells about his "*father, raised as a Catholic, converted to Communism. He fought for the Republic during the Spanish Civil War... His nine children had no religious schooling... I 'm not a Catholic...*" - and a Celtic supporter came out of it (p. 273). Catholicism, Communism, football - church, belief, practical devotion, ritual - what is the real religion in late modernity?

### People in motion and emotion

Around the questions of religion, sport, ethnicity and sectarianism, the book has collected a rich panorama of articles. Academic analyses are mixed with personal confessions and subjective stories. This patchwork is not only useful for selling the book - the volume being on offer among 'Green' football accessoires in the Celtic shops of Scottish towns (what our academic books of sport studies normally are not, sorry to say). But it brings also intellectual gains.

It is by the patchwork structure that richer nuances come forth - nuances between Irish and non-Irish, and Scottish and non-Scottish, between Catholic, Protestant and non-believers, between working class, journalists and artists - and also in the political field. There is "*a strong socialist republican tradition running through the Celtic support*", as playwright and professor Willy Maley states, and voices from supporters among Scottish Labour and in the ranks of Scottish Socialist Party SSP make this living; but "*there are also some small-minded 'right-wingers'*". From this latter side, however, one could wish to get some more documentation.

What holds this broad spectrum together, are emotions - an atmosphere of emotional identification. "*I have stood on the terraces and jumped with joy. Cried. Felt football as a fantastic, wonderful piece of theatre. Understood something of what community and identity mean through following a football team... And they were mine*" - writes a supporter from England. Irish-born, he has never been in Glasgow and only followed Celtic play on the TV screen. "*Celtic is unique*" - other professional clubs are virtual reality, their stadium is a theme park, and belonging a matter of purchase. "*Celtic is different... Celtic is ours even if we are not fans*", he concludes (p. 119-122). This football is something for "*heart and soul*", as two other articles are titled.

The deep emotions and the atmospheric energy of football have a close relation to music. "*This is our culture*," writes the Scottish composer James MacMillan about a meeting between Celtic football and Irish music. "*I felt inexplicably and profoundly moved - in various ways I was coming home.*" And Brian Warfield, co-founder and composer of the famous Irish folk group "Wolfe Tones" since the 1960s, casts light on the internationalism of the game through the internationalism of the "songs of the people". The Wolfe Tones mixed American, English, Scottish and Irish folk songs, rebel songs, emigration and work songs, industrial and sea shanties... "*The stories of any oppressed people are subversive.*"

## Foreign identity or hybrid identity?

In the light of this internationalism, the Irish unwillingness to assimilate gets its particular profile. An old British-Irish couplet tells that "*the Irish can't forget, and the British can't remember.*"

What comes out of the unwillingness to assimilate not clear-cut identities, but rather hybrid identities. Celtic was from the very beginning both an Irish club and a Scottish institution. This can be compared with other hybrid identities as the migrant identities of British Pakistani athletes and of British Sikh Asian players. Bradley also hints to the Croatian diaspora in Australian football. In the 1998 Soccer World Cup tournament, black communities in Britain visibly supported the countries of their heritage as Jamaica and Nigeria.

This may entice to a comparison with the Jewish identity question. Jewish individuals can without problems identify themselves for instance as Danish on one hand and close to Israel on the other. Sports clubs like the Hakoah in Copenhagen experienced similar inner tensions between being a Danish club and playing with other Jewish diaspora clubs after Israeli premises in the Maccabi World Union.<sup>6</sup> This is not at all schizophrenic, but Anti-Semitism has always played on this double relation of 'the Jew', creating distrust and suspicion around 'not being one'. The figure of the hybrid generated anxiety. This may have been a strong psychological background why there could develop an 'Anti-Semitism without Jews'.

From this comparison, the question may rise whether sectarian supporters and commentators in today's Scotland really have a problem with the Irish minority as being Irish (Catholic) - or as being hybrid. Many of the quotations about the case of McGeedy point rather in this latter direction. The player who was both Scottish and Irish, may threaten the identity of the Scot who is unsure of himself.

What is 'popular' in popular culture and in populism has, thus, a double face. On one hand, the hybrid is constitutional for popular culture. Hybrid is what people see, hear, feel in meeting Celtic F. C., Iro-Scottish folk music, Maccabi sport, reggae, rap and hip hop, Alan Stivell's Breton folk rock, Afro-American spirituals, country dance... There are no borders for pop-cultural hybridisation, just like bi- and multilingualism is the spoken reality of 'the people'. On the other hand, there is a certain popular horror of hybridisation, which has to be taken seriously. It paves the way for violent forms of populist hostility. People want to be at home in 'their' world and feel threatened by alienation.

Football opens, thus, for questions of profound theoretical character. These are not discussed in this volume, but they are touched and revolved around by the patchwork observations.

What is *racism* if it is not only related to the standard colour paradigm, black-white? 'The other' of racism are not all the others, but *one* specific other - the 'Catholic' in Scotland, the 'Jew' in anti-Semitic societies, the 'Black' in White Anglo Saxon Protestant America, the 'Muslim' in today's Denmark ... Antipathy and inferiorisation directed against the foreigners as such is not the whole story.

What is the relation between racism and *sectarianism*? As the Australian football-historian Bill Murray once stated: "*Anti-Catholicism is part of Scotland's history... racism is totally odious and foreign to all Scotland stands for.*"

What is the place of sectarianism in relation to *religion*? The sectarian conflict cannot be reduced to questions of religion, as Bradley underlines.

On the other hand, sectarianism is not only an *ersatz religion*, a sort of 'plastic religion' or substitute identity. It must be taken seriously as an expression of social conflict in current society. Certain tabloid papers use to speak derogatory about "*plastic Irishmen and women who drink in plastic Irish pubs and don't know their Athenry from their Antrim when it comes to Irish history or politics... Celtic must stop... flashing their Irishness...*"<sup>7</sup>. This fits into the superficial polemics of tabloid character, but the in-depth study of social movements has to analyse sectarian, populist, ethnic and quasi-religious expressions as a serious reflection of identity troubles.<sup>8</sup>

And why is it just *sport* that enters into this picture? Sport seems to tell in a very specific way about conflicting social relations and we-building. The personal identity of the single athlete (like McGeedy) meets the demands of collective representation (performing for Scotland, for Ireland, for Israel...). And the performance of the teams enters into the construction of 'Us' and 'Them'. All this is displayed in a stadium where flags and tunes fill the body-cultural space with the sensuality of identification.

## Sport as post-religious ritual?

A question of central significance remains, which role religion has in today's social relations and conflicts. There is reason to be self-critical. I have myself during long time kept to the assumption of 'post-religious society'. This may have been too naïve. Since one decade, Denmark experiences an anti-Muslim wave, expressed by the strong electorate of the right-wing populist Danish People's Party DF, which is de facto commanding the sitting bourgeois government in Copenhagen. This dramatic turn in a traditionally tolerant society has to be reflected in depth. Two 'dark priests' in the Danish parliament, Søren Krarup and Jesper Langballe, suddenly succeeded in constructing an equation between Danish and Christian. This equation may sound absurd, as the Danish can be regarded as one of the most liberal, if not pagan and in practice non-

Christian people in the world. But the 'Christian' argument has a certain efficacy, as soon as it is directed against specific 'others'. These others are not labelled as 'black' - though this may be the real racist background - but as Muslim. Racism is and remains in Denmark just like in Scotland an odious and foreign element...

All this is also important for understanding the worldwide rise of Muslim fundamentalism - and the strong tendencies of religious fundamentalism inside Israel, too. The question how strong the religious movements in nowadays society 'really' are, remains open. Or are they not so much religious, but rather sectarian?

That is the question, which makes the case of anti-Catholic Scotland theoretically significant - and the case of Scottish sport as post-religious ritual as well.

"*Belonging, hope and charity*" - is what two Celtic supporters discover in their relation to their club, or in other words: "*Faith, Hope and Love*" (p. 114). As both fans are lecturing religious education at the University of Glasgow, they may perhaps professionally overstress the religious dimension. Sport does not deliver answers to existential questions like: What happens after my death? How did the world begin? And where are we going? In this respect, sport is not religion. But the difference is not any longer as clear when referring to other questions of more subjective character: Who am I, and who are we? What should I do? Where do I belong, and who deserves my love? It is here that sport enters the scene.

Love, however, is not the point of sectarian departure. Sectarianism is where love disappears, and 'the enemy' takes over.

The international research could therefore have some important gain from paying special attention to the terminological differentiation, which has been developed in Scotland and Ireland - the difference between religion and sectarianism. Religion can develop without sectarianism, and sectarian hostility can explode without religion... With this differentiation in mind, the exploration turns from the focus on 'individual' prejudices and their moral judgement to the social dimension: Which state of societal *alienation* makes that religious contents disappear, so that 'the enemy' becomes a psychological need? The analytical question is, what sort of *alienation* feeds the 'Anti' - the destructive fantasies of "Fenian blood", which Rangers supporters conjure and exorcise by singing "Billy Boys". Alienation makes anxious, and anxiety searches the enemy...

In this respect, the Scottish case could contribute to the understanding of sectarian conflicts in other parts of the world - Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim in the Balkans, Hindu and Muslim in India, Shia and Sunni in Iraq and Pakistan... Comparative studies are requested.

So, the philosophical reflection returns from sport to alienation and the quest of identity, to religion and post-religion, to recognition and anxiety.

### One would like to know more

The "Celtic family" itself is not without 'black sheep'. As Willy Maley mentions, there are some Celtic "fanatics", and "*we cannot say we are without sin*". One would wish to read more detailed and critical about these problematical fans, but documentation is lacking in the book. Maybe, in 'family' one does not deepen these sides? Such silence makes it, however, difficult to test the non-symmetry between Green supporters and Orange sectarianism.

Maley also mentions the "notorious Celtic paranoia". This would be worth a deeper self-critical analysis, too. Undertones of self-victimisation are not quite absent in this volume - and one could ask whether the case of McGeady was too much overstressed. Anxiety is what connects the sectarian aggressor with the victim.

The agenda of reproach against racism and sectarianism seems also to prevent some differentiations, which may be important. The sectarian football conflict is centred around Glasgow and western Scotland. What about the other parts of Scotland? This is more than a question of nuances, it concerns the depth of analysis and understanding.

Further differentiations may be relevant when looking at historical change. How can the conflict in the Old Firm be periodically structured? The historical up-and-down of riots is important for an understanding of their societal dynamics. Maybe the difference between popular riots on one hand and the racist rhetoric of tabloid media on the other should also be taken more seriously. Attention to historical change is important for evaluating whether Rangers' recent ban of "Billy Boys" is really significant, whether the economical globalisation of the clubs has any impact, whether the Tartan Army's new Scottish nationalism changes the picture...

All this deserves critical attention - from the sociological observer, but not at least from the viewpoint of the "Celtic family", too. It may make us look forward to a third volume of *Celtic Minded*.

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### Literature

<sup>1</sup> This is described in the current standard work of Scottish history: Tom M. Devine 2000: *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000*. London: Penguin, 518-22. Also in Wikipedia: History of the Jews in Scotland, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Jews\\_in\\_Scotland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Scotland).

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph M. Bradley 2004 (ed.): *Celtic Minded. Essays on Religion, Politics, Society, Identity ... and Football*. Argyll: Argyll. Reviewed in *Idrottsforum* by Magnus Sjöholm, 23 November 2004

[http://www.idrottsforum.org/reviews/items/msjoholm\\_celtic.html](http://www.idrottsforum.org/reviews/items/msjoholm_celtic.html)

<sup>3</sup> Senay Boztas 2004: "Why Scotland has never hated Jews ... it was too busy hating Catholics." In: *Sunday Herald*, 17 October.

<sup>4</sup> A analysis of this inner split and its nuances inside Scottish sports can be found in Alan Bairner 2001: *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization. European and North American Perspectives*. Albany: State University of New York Press. Chapter 3: "We are the England haters! Sport and national identity in Scotland" (45-68).

<sup>5</sup> The standard work of this configuration remains Bill Murray 1984: *The Old Firm: Sectarianism, Sport and Society in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Johan Donald.

<sup>6</sup> Jørn Hansen 1998: "Hakoah i Danmark – en undtagelse? En undersøgelse af jødisk idræt i Danmark i perioden 1930 til 1945." In: *Idrætshistorisk årbog*, 14: 75-86.

<sup>7</sup> Comment of a football columnist in *News of the World*, 2001, quoted by Bradley p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Even in academic work one has attempted to apply the derogative discourse of the "plastic word". It was for instance directed against the term of "identity" being a "plastic word" in general – as was argued by Lutz Niethammer & Axel Dossmann 2000: *Kollektive Identität. Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.

<sup>9</sup> Between the study of sport and the study of religion lies the exploration of Danish soccer fans by Lise Joern 2006: *Homo fanaticus – passionerede fodboldsupportere*. (= Bevægelsesstudier. 9) Gerlev: Bavnebanke.