Celtic Warfare: Fact or Fiction?

Assessing the legitimacy of the “Celtic Warfare” thesis as applied by Hill to the late medieval and early medieval Gaelic societies of Scotland and Ireland, and by McWhiney and Jamieson to the tactics of the South in the American Civil War.

Ben Kerr

Version: 01
Date: 4th December 2009
Version: 01
Date: 4th December 2009
Research: Copyright © Ben Kerr, 2009
Typesetting: Copyright © Academy of Historical Arts, 2011

Submitted for the award of MLitt in War Studies at the University of Glasgow.

This document is released freely for personal and academic purposes and is not bound by the Triquetra Services Licensing Regulations document.
For people in the modern world, it is easy to romanticise about the great warriors of the past. In today’s world, we do not have men who are specifically warriors, fighting for honour and so that they can be remembered for eternity. This leads us to look back and to remember the men who fought before; often we remember them not for their victories but for the battle in which they were finally brought down. Great battles like Thermopylae from which we remember the Spartans, Shiroyama from which we remember the Samurai, Culloden from which we remember the Celtic Highlander and finally Gettysburg from which we remember the Confederate. In remembering them, historians often ask themselves why these warriors chose such aggressive tactics in the face of certain death. For the Spartan and Samurai it was cultural, but what of the Highlander or the Confederate? That both made use of similar tactics, is there perhaps a cultural link that travelled across the ocean, an ethnic tie of sorts that influenced the tactics of the two units as it had done from their “Celtic” past? This essay will look at the works of Hill, McWhiney and Jamieson who argue for a continuity of in Celtic warfare and tactics from Roman times to the Confederacy of the US Civil War and will assess whether a specific Celtic style of warfare is historical fact or glorious fiction.

Hill’s Celtic warfare thesis is based around a central idea of continuity in the Celtic practice of war from Roman times up until the eighteenth century. This idea suggests that the Celtic style of warfare was primitive and largely resisted change even when the rest of Europe participated in a Military Revolution as proposed by Michael Roberts in his article *The Military Revolution, 1560-1660*. As well as suggesting that Celtic warfare could be defined as primitive, Hill suggests that it was also heavily based on individual prowess. Other areas that Hill identifies that characterise the Celtic style of warfare are a lack of discipline, lack of standardised equipment and finally (most importantly to Hill) the use of strictly offensive tactics culminating in the Highland Charge. In order to proceed with assessing the validity of Hill’s thesis, it is important first to determine how these points are used to show a defined and continuing system of Celtic warfare then to look at the arguments for and against that use, and to assess which is more valid. Only then can one determine the legitimacy of the Celtic warfare thesis as applied by Hill to the late medieval and early modern Gaelic societies.

The first of these points put forward by Hill is the idea of Celtic warfare being primitive in comparison to other European forms of war. Hill states that “The characteristics of the ancient Celts’ military strategies, tactics, and logistics distinguished them from their Greek and Roman adversaries; these same characteristics are apparent in their Gaelic descendants’ military system pitted against England from the late sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries.”¹ He also suggests that the Celtic form of warfare, especially that employed by the Scottish gallowglass, adopted Nordic weaponry to accomplish their tactics due to the Norse influence in preceding centuries.² In favour of this point, it is hard to argue that there is a primitive appearance to Celtic warfare especially in the early modern period. The

---

¹Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh 1986) p1
Scottish warriors were still wearing the kilt, and both the Scottish and Irish Gaels were making use of the bow in their form of warfare while armies on the continent and even within the British Isles were switching over to the musket as the weapon of choice. Hill also points out that the tactics used were primitive in nature. The tactics of Celtic warfare relied on shock tactics from the time of fighting Caesar up until the time of the Highland Charge. It appears that the Celts adopted an "as it has been, so shall it be" attitude which largely seems to have worked from them until the seventeenth century when the British redeveloped their tactics and stopped fighting the Celts in a primitive manner and switched to forcing them to engage in the modern manner, by moving away from viewing warfare as an art and towards viewing it as a science.

The problem with this view of Celtic warfare as primitive is that the Scottish and Irish Gaels fought on the continent. We are told that in Holland the Dutch "mingle and blend the Scottish among them, which are like Beans and Peas among chaff. These are sure men, hardy and resolute, and their example holds up the Dutch." It would be impossible to think that the Scottish and Irish mercenaries were serving in early modern armies but were permitted to make use of primitive tactics. Even if that was the case they would have been exposed to the modern tactics and weaponry on the continent and would be returning with at least some knowledge of these, thus the conclusion to which one is forced to come is that they were not as remote and primitive as Hill’s thesis suggests, but rather that the continuation of their tactics was more a response to what was working for them at the time, and that they were capable of adapting to modern militaries on occasion where it was required.

The next point of Hill’s thesis on Celtic warfare is that it was highly based upon individual prowess. This is based upon what Hill believes motivated the Celtic warrior, “he was motivated by the ends of the combat rather than the means. To fight a good fight, win or lose, was often more important than fighting in a distasteful fashion.” Even the commanders perpetuated an individualist ideal by leading from the front and taking on the most dangerous roles of combat, the Celtic general and society “imparted to their men the importance of fighting for honour, reputation and perhaps ultimately secular immortality as well as for the sheer love of combat.” In a society with these values instilling the idea that the being remembered for deeds in combat transcended the desire to survive the encounter, it is easy to see why individualism was so important to the tactics employed. Every one of the Celtic warriors on the field would probably be hoping to take first blood and to be seen reaching and breaking the enemy’s line first, so the charge allowed them to do

---

4Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh 1986) p3
5Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh 1986) p4
7Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh, 1986) p4
8Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh, 1986) p2
this while still performing a role as part of a tactical unit.

The problem with this part of the thesis is largely that on its own it does not define a specifically Celtic form of warfare: many warrior societies have encouraged acts of individual courage and prowess on the battlefield. As has been pointed out in online forums debating Hill’s thesis, although the heroics and individual valour of Celtic warriors appears in many of the contemporary accounts, to consider it a part of what makes up a specifically Celtic style of warfare is absurd. It is natural for an oral society like that of the Celtic peoples to talk more about the heroic deeds performed on the battlefield, but to suggest that every Celtic warrior was performing these deeds to the extent that it can be considered unique to a Celtic form of warfare would be like suggesting, as one online user pointed out, that British warfare from 1865 was built on individual valour because Victoria Crosses received disproportionate coverage in the media. So it seems reasonable to suggest that individualism may have been encouraged the tactics used, but it was only a part of a larger societal encouragement on the style of warfare adopted and continued by the Celts.

A part of Celtic warfare that is suggested by Hill, that is influenced by the previous two parts discussed, is the lack of discipline. This, Hill suggests, is why the Celts made use of smaller armies than their contemporaries. As Hill points out: “a lack of organisation and military discipline precluded an effective amassing of large bodies of troops.” This lack of discipline is apparent in situations where the Celts, having failed at a single attempt of their charge, turn and leave the field. Although a lack of discipline is apparent in some situation with the Celtic warriors, there also appears to be a great deal of discipline involved in carrying out the charge. As Hill inadvertently points out, during an infantry charge “fire control was nearly impossible to maintain”, yet in the deployment of the Highland Charge the warriors had to wait until they were relatively close to their opponents before firing off their volley of musket fire as one, so that the smoke screen would screen them as they formed small wedges which then charged the enemy line. This requires a fair amount of discipline in order to be executed because if one part of the line fires too early it could destroy the smoke screen or if firing too late it could cause too few to be charging the enemy line to be able to break through significantly, as the tactic relied on a significant portion of the warriors reaching the enemy line to break it with only a single charge. Also for Celtic warriors to receive glowing reviews from the continent and from outside sources would probably not happen if they were unable to maintain discipline.

---

9 http://revisewise.debatewise.com/debates/1199-wars-of-the-three-kingdoms-did-the-gaels-have-a-distinct-form-of-warfare (last accessed 01/12/09)
10 Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh, 1986) p2
13 Sir Anthony St Leger, informed Henry VIII in 1543 that the galloglaich were the “one part of the Irish army that could be entrusted to stand its ground to the end.” quoted in Hill, M. ‘The distinctiveness of Gaelic warfare’, European History Quarterly 22 (1992) p327
The next point in Hill’s thesis which build on the previous points is that in Celtic warfare there is a lack of standardised equipment. The Scottish warrior from the highlands is described as being “weell armed with habershones, muriones, and targates; for offensive armes, they had gunes, bowes, swords, and aixes, called of some Lochaber aixes.” The Celtic warrior was expected to equip himself for battle and so uniformity or standardisation was difficult to achieve. The other problem was that “in the Gaelic world firearms were never given an equal standing with the claymore and target, weapons that if properly wielded earned the much sought after praise of bards.” By not embracing the firearm and pike, the tactics used for Celtic warfare had to be different from those used elsewhere and as this method did not require the standardisation of equipment, standardisation did not occur within Celtic units. Where Hill is wrong in this part of his thesis is that he suggests that the Celtic warriors resisted and refused outside influence when in reality they did not standardise their equipment due to practicality.

The Celtic style of warfare, if we are to accept Hill’s premise, is based around guerilla and shock tactics. It is for a terrain where pike and cannon would be unsuitable, and when the musket was found to be useful it was adopted and used as part of the charge. It can be viewed that, rather than the Celtic warriors desiring to preserve a pure form of Celtic warfare, they merely did not standardise based on practicality at the time.

The final point to discuss of Hill’s thesis is the importance of strictly offensive tactics within Celtic warfare, the most important of which was the Charge. Hill identifies that at many of the important battles in the history of the Celtic people, extremely offensive tactics have been deployed in the manner of an all-or-nothing charge, the most famous of these being the Highland Charge made famous during the Jacobite rebellion and finally devastated at Culloden. Hill concludes that the charge was successful because of the “emphasis that Celts placed on individual prowess.” The Highland Charge was impressive but was it Celtic in nature or was it an adaption of European tactics from the time? The argument for it being an adapted European tactic is that it is similar to tactics used by the Swedes under Gustav Adolf. A quote describing the Swedish attack at the Battle of Breitenfeld states:

“I suffered not my Muskettiers to give their volleys, till I came within Pistoll-shot of the enemy: at which time I gave order to the three first rancks to discharge at once, and after them the other three: which done. We fell pell mell into their rancks, knocking them downe with the stocke of the Musket, and our swords.”

This quote is similar to one made by Wishart while describing the Highland

---

14 Patrick Gordon, A Short Abridgement of Britane’s Distemper, from the yeare of God 1636 to 1649 (The Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1844) p94
16 Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh, 1986) p3
17 Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh, 1986) p48
Charge at Tippermuir:

“They should not so much as make a shot till they come to the very Teeth of their Enemies; and as soon as they had discharged their muskets once a piece, immediately to break upon the Enemy with their swords and Musket-ends.” 19

The more interesting point beyond that these both could be referring to the same event is that the former quote actually describes a Scottish regiment serving under Gustav Adolf which has led to speculation by historians such as Grosjean and Murdoch that this is the idea from which the Highland Charge originated.20 The Swedish army was an extremely advanced and disciplined army from the time period and yet in the times of Gustav Adolf and then Charles XII their aggressive tactics fit with Hill’s “attack against all reason, against all odds.” 21 The tactics were most likely adaptations of those learned by the Scottish units and then modified for their own use back home, this does not make them any less effective, it just means that the tactics were intelligently chosen and adapted, rather than passed down through some ethnic link.

In conclusion, I would argue that Hill’s thesis although very tidy is ideological thinking. All too often it is easy as a historian to set out to prove something that one wants to see, and so forget to look at it objectively. He is right that the Celts were extremely aggressive and courageous in their warfare, and it is easy to desire to glorify the warrior style in an age where war is practiced by soldiers. It is also hard to disagree that similar tactics were used throughout their history, but similar tactics have been used by many people in desperate situations making their last stand and often it truly is a last stand as they tend to be destroyed by the less emotional force. However, perhaps looking at McWhiney and Jamieson’s thesis on a Celtic style of warfare will make stronger Hill’s thesis and allow one to see better an ethnic link to the practice of warfare by the Celtic peoples through history.

The second part of the discussion on the continuity and discussion of Celtic warfare comes from a thesis put forward by McWhiney and Jamieson that is summarised in the conclusion of Hill’s book, Celtic Warfare 1595-1763, which states that the Celtic style of warfare was continued by the Confederate States during the US Civil War. The Celtic Warfare thesis as applied by McWhiney and Jamieson is built on the idea that the southern states were Celtic whereas the northern states were English. In order to understand and analyse the concept of the Confederate tactics as predominantly Celtic in nature, it is important first to understand and assess the ideas that McWhiney and Jamieson built upon to reach this conclusion. These ideas are largely about proving strong enough links between what McWhiney

---

19 George Wishart, A Complete History of the Wars in Scotland under the conduct of the illustrious James, Marquis of Montrose (1720) p28
20 Alexia Grosjean “Scotland: Sweden’s closest ally?” pp143-171 Steve Murdoch (ed.) Scotland and the Thirty Years Wars 1618-1648 (Brill, Leiden, 2001) p158
and Jamies consider to be Celtic peoples and the people who make up the southern states of America. The three ideas from McWhiney and Jamieson’s thesis that are important in understanding the concept of the continuation of a specifically Celtic style of warfare are the evidence from names, the evidence of farming techniques and finally (probably the most important idea) of exactly what definition of Celtic is being used by McWhiney and Jamieson. In this section the merit of each of these ideas will be assessed as they are the foundation upon which the ideas about warfare were built, thus if they fail to hold up under scrutiny then it will be difficult for the warfare part of the thesis to stand alone.

The first evidence used by McWhiney in his Southern Celticity thesis is the appearance of what he and McDonald (another scholar with whom McWhiney worked on the Southern Celticity thesis) determine to be Celtic names in records of the southern states. The biggest problem with the surname analysis is in their decision to exclude any surnames with the prefix of “Mac”. The reason they state for going this is that after the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 “the use of clan names – mostly Mac’s – was outlawed.” The idea that the “Mac” surname was outlawed come from the idea that many of the rebels were attained by an act of parliament which could be read as having lost the right to possess a surname for public use, but as Berthoff points out what occurred when someone was attained was the forfeiture of estates and loss of “the rights of heirs to property.” There is no evidence for any Jacobite being deprived of his surname, and certainly not whole clans, by the attainment or any other legal power. If this is the case, then the surname analysis is flawed from the outset in that it does not consider a whole section of presumably Celtic name holders. The other problem with the name analysis addressed by Berthoff is that it is used to suggest that the majority of displaced highlanders went to America after the 1745 rebellion when the reality from census details is, as Seton and Arnot point out, that the majority actually travelled to France and Europe instead of America, which suggests that this is part of the reason for the use of skewed figures in McWhiney’s and McDonald’s analysis. A final problem with the surname analysis, which will be discussed in a later section, is what McWhiney and McDonald define as Celtic areas in the British Isles. This definition which takes in all of lowland Scotland and parts of northern England causes problems, but it allows for an argument that the northern states were three-fourths English whereas the southern states were three-fifths Celtic, which is an important part of their later argument that the American Civil War was a “re-enactment of the English Civil War.”

The next point used to back the Southern Celticity thesis is the nature of southern farming, most importantly livestock herding. In this section it is argued that

22McDonald and McDonald, “Ethnic Origins of the American People,” pp190-191
23Berthoff, Rowland; “Celtic Mist of the South.” Journal of Southern History 1986 52(4) p538
25McDonald and McDonald, “Ethnic Origins of the American People,” p199
the reason the South had an affinity to livestock herding in a manner similar to the people they defined as Celtic is because of a shared ethnicity rather than the similar geography of the areas. McWhiney argues that southern herding was not a general Anglo-American affair but instead was a reflection of “the foremost division in the British Isles: the cultural and agricultural differences between English crop growers and the Celtic animal grazers.” The problem is that if one suggests that an ethnic celticity caused people in the South to prefer herding and animal husbandry over growing crops, and apparently to accept this we are to ignore the Southern plantations, then one also suggests the only the Celtic peoples were herding in the British Isles. As Berthoff argues this is simply not the case, not only were other groups herding such as in southeastern England (settled primarily by Danes, Angles and Saxons and not at all Celtic) where the land was too low to drain properly for planting, but large portions of highlanders and islanders were in fact planting and often with great success. Does this mean that the South was not influenced by Celtic forms of agriculture? Not at all, but rather to suggest that they acted in this manner because of a desire to follow a Celtic background is unlikely and it is far more likely to have been a response to the nature of the area they were attempting to farm.

The final problem with the Southern Celticiity thesis upon which the idea of the southern states employing a specifically Celtic style of warfare is built is the definition of the word Celtic within the thesis. The problem is that their definition of what constitutes Celtic within the British Isles includes not only Gaelic and Brythonic speakers, but also lowland Scotland and “southwestern, western and northern parts of England.” They do state that they do not view the people as similar in a genetic sense, but rather that they possess “a common cultural heritage — customary lifestyles, attitudes and ways of doing things.” This would be fine, except that the use of it seems to be one of picking and choosing what aspects are valid depending upon the argument. In the practice of warfare, we see huge differences between people from these regions; where the Highlanders had the Highland Charge, there is no documentation of people from northern England practicing a similar form of warfare, and even the lowland Scots ceased to practice this style of warfare. This shows the danger in applying this definition of Celtic to such a wide area: it damages the argument by making it too wide a focus, thus allowing a great deal of criticism from other academics, and in turn this can damage arguments made from these presuppositions such as that the US Civil War saw the South deploy and act in a specifically Celtic manner.

Having address the basic ideas of the Southern Celticiity thesis proposed by McWhiney, one is now able to look objectively at the arguments for the continua-

26 McWhiney and McDonald, “Celtic Origins of Southern Herding.” pp165-167
27 Berthoff, Rowland; “Celtic Mist over the South.” Journal of Southern History 1986 52(4) p532
28 Berthoff, Rowland; “Celtic Mist over the South.” Journal of Southern History 1986 52(4) p525
29 McDonald and McWhiney, “South from Self-Sufficiency to Peonage” pp1107-1108
ation of Celtic warfare within the South during the US Civil War. McWhiney and Jamieson begin by quoting individuals from the period who describe the South as Celtic in its treatment of warfare. They then go on to attempt to show the continuity of Celtic warfare from Roman times through to the time of the US Civil War. The problems with this have been addressed already in the section regarding Hill’s thesis, as clearly that was influenced heavily by this work. There is no denying that those of a Celtic background do appear to use more aggressive and shock tactics, but logically sound arguments such as this are rare in McWhiney and Jamieson’s thesis of the use of Celtic tactics. They do on to state that the English and Celtic “dichotomy in America was not only the major cause of the Civil War but it explains the way the war was fought as it was.” They argue that as this war was basically a continuation of the conflict between Celts and the English, it is understandable that Southerners would fight as their Celtic ancestors had and that the North would emulate English tactics, “even in recruiting foreigners and blacks to do some fighting for them.”

If one is to ignore the extremely broad statements, for example that the Civil War was caused by a cultural argument between two of the many peoples that make up the continent North America, and if one is to accept McWhiney and Jamieson’s argument that the tactics deployed by the South were Celtic in nature, then in continuing to read one finds that a large portion of this argument hinges on two main points that McWhiney and Jamieson consider Celtic in nature: that the Southerners employed the Celtic Charge and that they were undisciplined.

The first of these points is the employment of the Celtic Charge and aggressive tactics within Southern tactics. McWhiney and Jamieson use the Battle of Gettysburg as their main point to demonstrate the use of very aggressive tactics facilitated by a series of charges. The thing to address here is that the CSA used multiple charges during this battle, unlike the Celts as described in other battles who upon a single failed charge would all but give up. Another point made by McWhiney and Jamieson within the use of aggressive tactics is tales of Southerners beheading their enemies and using the skulls for items such as soup bowls and soap dishes. The problem with this point is that to assume this behaviour was necessarily Celtic, because of accounts of Celts beheading their enemies, ignores other cultures with whom the Southerners would have had contact. Native Americans and Africans both had cultures cultures of ritualistically removing enemy body parts, as well there existing some evidence that some Germanic tribes practiced head hunting, so to suggest that this behaviour was solely Celtic in nature would be to ignore the other cultures with whom the Southerners had contact.

The next point in the thesis is that the Southerners lacked discipline as was often said of the Celts. The Southerners were “not used to control of any sort, and were not disposed to obey anybody except for good and sufficient reason.” Even

---

General Lee stated that “the great want in our army is firm discipline.”\textsuperscript{32} It is hard to argue that discipline was a problem within the Southern army of the time when their own General Lee commented upon it. The difficulty comes when suggesting that this is because of the Celticity of the troops, as for that to be true, no other underdog army could be undisciplined. This is simply not the case, it is in fact common for revolutionary armies to lack the discipline of regular forces; revolutionaries tend to be fighting in a very emotional state as they are fighting for an ideal. The fact is that often the Celtic peoples were in this situation fighting a much more powerful army made up of soldiers who were not fighting for an ideal but rather because they must, or for some form of compensation. This lack of discipline can also explain the aggressive tactics being employed, as it would be much easier for a commander of disciplined troops to keep strong enough control over them that they would not make the all-in charge once the adrenaline kicked in. In the same way, a commander over an undisciplined army would find that his best option would be to allow and to strengthen the charge as much as possible; to try and maintain discipline over the troops would lead to a half-hearted charge from those over whom the commander lost this discipline, and this would be devastating on the field.

Thus I would argue that rather than a common ethnic background being the reason for the tendency for the Southerners and Celts to be undisciplined and highly aggressive, it is perhaps more to do with the nature of what they were fighting for. They were revolutionaries, fighting the larger force, and thus relying on emotion and idealism to carry them forward rather than military discipline and compensation. The ideas proposed by McWhiney and Jamieson in their Celticity within Southern Warfare thesis are built on a not very sturdy foundation as shown by Berthoff, and in themselves tend to be closer to coincidences or rather ideas that would make an interesting study of characteristics of revolutionary forces or of armies in similar circumstances, rather than being specifically a continuation of a Celtic style of warfare.

In closing, I feel that from studying these two rather similar theses, that neither show a continuation of (or a uniquely) Celtic style of warfare in practice. I feel that the authors were perhaps trying too hard to form a Celtic identity that transcends time and space, and in doing so neglected plausible aspects of their work with broad statements and flawed or skewed research. This negation severely hurts their argument, and makes it difficult to argue positively for the legitimacy of a specifically Celtic style of warfare in use from the late medieval period to the US Civil War.

\textsuperscript{32} Eggleston, G.C., “A Rebel’s Recollections” (New York, 1989) p29, 33
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berthoff, Rowland; “Celtic Mist over the South.” *Journal of Southern History* (1986) 52(4)


Frost, R.I., The Northern Wars; War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe, 1558-1721 (Harlow, 2000)

George Wishart, A Complete History of the Wars in Scotland under the conduct of the illustrious James, Marquis of Montrose (Edinburgh, 1986)

Grosjean, A., ‘Scotland: Sweden’s Closest Ally?’ (Brill, 2001)


Hill, M. Celtic Warfare 1595-1763 (Edinburgh, 1986)


Murdoch, S. (ed.) Scotland and the Thirty Years War 1618-1648 (Leiden, 2001)

Patrick Gordon, A Short Abridgement of Britane’s Distemper, from the yeare of God 1636 to 1649 (The Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1844)
