



Duke Ellington's Home of the Blues

Part Ten

CULTURAL CHANGE

At the turn of the century in the South, the Celtic-driven poor White regions were fighting a successful war of resistance against the formal victory of the North in the Civil War. Meanwhile, in the North, a Celtic-driven Catholic movement gave leadership and shape to the new urban popular culture. Just as the Celts of the country took over the county courthouses and local politics, the city Celts took over the city halls and urban politics. A great deal more was to happen in the twentieth century to this urban culture, nationalizing it, with changed ethnicity and styles, with flashy displays.

Long after the popular culture altered, however,
Irish Catholic prominence in city politics held steady
and even expanded around the metropolitan regions and
into the general offices of state governments and Congress.

I have mentioned from time to time that the
Celtic elements in American immigration from its beginnings
ought to be distinguished from the English elements
in order to explain some of the larger
religious, military, cultural, attitudinal and political phenomena of
American history. Alterations of name, often done in the Old Country
in the wake of conquests and migration,
the formal tenacity of the English in holding offices and
commercial supremacy, and their control of Americanizing
propaganda in the schools and press,
contributed to the concealment of the ethnic forces at work.
What was true of Celts was also true of Germanics:
their role was understated.

These three amorphous aggregates constituted some part or all
of the ancestry of over fifty per cent of the
American population then and still now.
They were divided into various contingents within themselves.
They gave, though in more and more latent forms,
much shape to American history,
even when not intending to do so and when unnoticed,
or, if noticed, misconstrued.

Germanics, largest in number, had been traumatized before
their first appearance on the American colonial stage,
by the Thirty Years War ending in 1648,
which devastated central Europe beyond what was to be
suffered there in World War II. When they began to arrive in America
two generations later, they were intent upon establishing a stable and
secure society, and upon building, within a framework
that was Protestant generally, but with large Catholic elements to
come, a regularly progressive agricultural and industrial order, with
as modest a political participation as might be granted them.
(Many did hope they might be allowed to be socialists.)

The English-derived elements, begun radically different in the Old
Country as Yankee, Pluralist and Southerner, took different paths. The
South played out with slavery, and when that was gone
continued a path that was heavily Africanized and Celticized. The
North's English element, split among Episcopalians,
Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Unitarians, Quakers, Baptists,
Methodists, and sundry other sects and secularist groups,

persisted strongly, governing literature and the arts,
as these were publicized and taught in the schools.

They ran the educational systems and the organs of national
ideology and myth, four-fifths of all these perhaps,
to indicate how small the role of the Celts and Germanics as such,
although popular Germanic cultures,
like those of several other nationalities,
were probably superior to the English when
compared social stratum by stratum.

The Celts never lost a common identity of sorts,
although they fought often amongst themselves -
Scots, Scots-Irish, Catholic Irish, Welsh ,
Cornish, English "borderlanders".

(We could add the Huguenots, the Louisiana and
Canadian French, Celtic as well, all three).

"British" comes from Britain and Breton, and "Great Britain"
is such by self-proclaimed comparison with Bretagne of France.

If we search for ancient clues, we can remember a
European continent and islands well-covered by Celts,
warring among themselves and invading periodically Greece and Italy
until driven off with finality, then
conquered by the Romans, largely Romanized, and afterwards
overwhelmed by the German tribes.

We can watch these tribal peoples as they fought in the course of
dire retreats, until we meet them in the seeming last stages of
resistance (always lending genes to the incoming
dominators) in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, the Channel
Islands, and Bretagne. There they fought clan against clan and from
time to time in larger wars of defense or reprisal against the
English and French. On the eve of English incursions in America,
Shakespeare chants of an old complaint of King Henry the Fifth
against the "pilfering borderers", adding that these
Scots came down upon England every time
English attention was turned to France.
Americanization did not end all of this, but
let it be a psychic hormone, circulating nervously.

The adjectives with which ethnologists describe the Celts
bear some truth: individualistic, devoted to heroes like King Arthur,
maintaining sacral relations with forest - fountains - stones,
imaginative, musical, with secular songs led by their bards. The Welsh of
America spoke less and less in their own language over the hundreds
of years of their coming, as they did in Great Britain.
Occupationally and geographically expansive, though without

total miscegenation, they dwelled throughout
American society – up, down, and around.

America was to be the happy hunting grounds for the Celts,
miserable for them in the beginning and for most of the time as for
most people, but allowing material means and territory for maneuver.

Instead of the meager borderlands of North England,
they had two thousand miles of frontier.

Instead of a stable ever-centralizing and encroaching
English government, they had a completely decentralized,
locally near-anarchic, congeries of governments
that were set up like permanent barracks
wherever one wished to camp for a while.

They had Indian tribes to provoke into rampage, and
against which to unleash fury and ruin in turn.

There had been provided for them,
mostly from English sources and leaders like the Framers,
many institutional halls where they might go
hallooing, roistering, capering, posturing,
stamping out new laws in abundance.

For two centuries the Celts gave the American Republic
much of its lurid color, without receiving credit or taking credit except
as Americans, until they became subdued in the twentieth century
by the massive bureaucratic nature of
the world and America itself and by the
forceful new cultural influences transforming the country.

Still, the Celts composed the most characteristic shade of Americans,
reinforced, in their Northern Catholic and irreligious expression,
unadmittedly and unaware, by the Italics, Jews, and
Mediterraneans in general, and by the Africans. There was always a
bending toward English in etiquette and Germanic in substance,
but the volatility of America, its contrariness and surprising behaviors,
its mobility, its popular culture, where not African, has
derived broadly, for better or worse, from older Celtic sources.

The Celts, with their aforesaid characterological allies,
were adapted historically to extreme individualism,
and then to the evangelical preaching cults,
yet still could flourish alongside and as part of
a strong formal system parallel to established authority
(Catholic and Presbyterian churches and synagogues),
and informal clans, fraternal orders, mafias,
county-courthouse gangs,
and city political machines.

With all of this, a monolithic constitutional order

was out of the question.



However, now may be the time to introduce more forcibly
an idea alluded to on several earlier occasions.

The greatest immigration to America, a constant intake, was the
culture of Europe. Men like Franklin and Jefferson,
who knew many immigrants personally and helped to bring in people ,
were also continuously importing European
tastes, opinions, and practices.

We might set up a strong case for the proposition that
mental immigration and commerce had more to do with
forming and changing American character than all immigrants.

Importation of Darwin's book on the *Origin of Species*
commenced during the Civil War. The book was currency for the
next century and had certainly the effect of a million
immigrants on the collective American mind and behavior.

There were other works, other influences, other voices:
the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclicals of the
Popes on social questions, the Impressionist painters,
hundreds of inventions, devices, procedures,
laws, and all kinds of styles and fads,
altogether an enormous sweeping in
of customs, science and educational procedures.

The American Progressive movement, turbulent though it was,
could not be compared in intensity and effect with
the political movements enveloping Europe at the same time.
There was more than a grain of truth in the reactionary complaint that
the country was being overrun with radical foreign notions.

Our thesis, however, faces *reductio ad absurdum*,
if we were to claim that warm bodies were unneeded for cultural
development, the psychic immigrants being enough. For, quite apart
from the fact that an enormous diversified cultural load was
introduced by immigrants, achieving a heavy impact because it was
a hands-on process, a great many immigrants had the capacity
culturally to develop rapidly in the American environment,
following operations that were part of their tradition –
even if hitherto beyond their competence –
furthermore seeking to outstrip the natives, and
possessing sharp mental tools to help them do so.