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Wentworth Webster and the Basque Question in Victorian Britain and Beyond

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Wentworth Webster was born in Uxbridge 1829 and entered Lincoln College, Oxford, in 1849. He seems to have been very much an Oxford man — many of his correspondents were at Oxford and he left most of his papers to the Bodleian. Between university and his ordination, in 1861 he travelled in Europe and South America. When he was ordained in 1861 it was with the express intention of exercising his ministry among the English expatriates in France. Under the Second Empire (and indeed both before and after) there was a substantial English population in the Basses-Pyrénées. It was cheap, it was supposedly a healthy climate, and there was some sort of tradition of an English presence going back at least to the Invasion of France in 1813 [1]. Wentworth Webster settled there, ostensibly for health reasons in the early 1860s, first at Bagnères-de-Bigorre (where he met his wife, Thekla Laura Knipping, from Cleves in Germany), then Biarritz, where he served as chaplain (the first Anglican church having been founded there in 1861 by the Colonial and Continental Church Society). He then became the Anglican chaplain at Saint-Jean-de-Luz from 1869 to 1882. It cannot have been a very onerous position: of the seven baptisms he performed during this period, three were for his own children [2]. He made a bit of money on the side by tutoring (one of his students was Henry Butler Clarke, the famous historian of Spain and fellow of Saint John's Oxford [3] ; another was his own son, Erwin Webster, future fellow of Wadham College Oxford, and apparently a Greek scholar destined for great things, had he not been killed at the Battle of Arras in 1917) [4]. But he certainly had the time (and presumably a private income) to indulge his personal interests. During his retirement years Webster was quite a well-known figure, sought out on by many British visitors to Biarritz. He dined several times with William Ewart Gladstone, the leader of the British Liberal Party, in the early 1890s ; one of Gladstone's last acts as Prime Minister in 1894 was to arrange for Webster to receive a civil list pension in 1894 for his services to Basque scholarship [5]. The author George Gissing was another neighbour and friend in his last years [6]. Even Edward VII paid him a visit, two weeks before Webster died in 1907 [7].

His reputation as a scholar was based on a quite extraordinary number of books, articles and reviews, mostly in English but he also wrote fluently in Spanish and French. He authored a guidebook to Spain, a history of Simon de Montfort, a collection of articles on the history of the Church in France and Spain, and another about Basque culture. He wrote the entry on the Basques for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. There was an endless stream of articles on aspects of Pyrenean history, archaeology, fauna and flora, the Protestant churches of France, Carlism, contemporary developments in Catholicism, and all things Basque in the *Academy*, the *Athenaeum*, the *Spectator*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *Chambers Magazine*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, the *Ecclesiastical Magazine*, the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, the *Gypsy Lore Society Journal*, the *English Historical Review*, the *Journal of the Church Historical Society*, the *Foreign Church Chronicle*, the *Anglican Church Magazine*, the *Swiss Anglican*

Magazine, the *Biarritz Parish Magazine*, *The Season*, *The Pyrenean* (both English language Biarritz publications), la *Revue de Linguistique*, *La Réforme sociale*, *La Nouvelle Revue*, le *Bulletin Hispanique*, le *Bulletin de la Société des Sciences et des Arts de Bayonne*, le *Bulletin de la Société Ramond*, *Euskal Erria*, and el *Boletin de la Real Academia de la Historia of Madrid*. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Rather surprisingly he was not a member of the London Folklore Society, even though many of his closest collaborators were: however his work on Basque folklore was regularly cited in the journal, he clearly had epistolary correspondence with members of the Society (including Gladstone), and he supplied translations of Spanish material for the Society's journal.

The book that he is probably best known for today is *Basque Legends, Collected Chiefly in the Labourd* (London, 1877). I am not going to pretend that this collection of Basque oral traditions plays anything like the role of, say, Lönnrot's *Kalevala* in the Finnish cultural revival, nor that Webster was the Basque Vuk Karadzic. But it and he were not without significance to the development of Basque culture and Basque nationalism — hence this work is currently available in French, Spanish and Basque translations [8]. His home is honoured with a plaque placed there by a Basque cultural society [9]. Webster provided Basques with something that they did not then have but which every self-proclaimed nation needs — a literature of its own. In the 1870s, at least on the French side of the border, there was almost no literature available in Basque except translations of religious works most of which originated from outside the Basque country. There was, or there was presumed to be, a distinctive Basque oral literature, but almost no one had made the effort to collect it. Webster was one of the first to do so, and so he is a figure of some note in the history of the cultivation of national culture in the Basque country, and honoured there as such. Just how "Basque" his legends actually were is a subject to which I will return below.

Clerics and the cultivation of national culture

In general, the cultivators of national culture in nineteenth-century Europe were indigenes of the region whose traditions and language they recorded: that was obviously the case with Lönnrot and Karadzic, for example. And according to most theoretical models of nationalism this should indeed be the case, because only autochthones could reasonably expect to reap the political rewards of cultural activism. In nineteenth-century France, for example, a fairly widespread assumption is that folklore collecting was pursued by traditional elites — aristocratic landowners and clerics — who found their position increasingly challenged within a centralizing, urbanizing and democratizing state, and so sought to carve out provincial strongholds for themselves, defined through culture.

There are figures in the Basque nineteenth-century cultural revival to whom this model might be relevant: Webster's *Legends* was dedicated to Antoine d'Abbadie, a Basque noble (in as much as there is such a thing), explorer and language scholar. A rather more convincing case might be made for the Basque Catholic clergy who were central to the defence of Basque language and culture at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. On the French side of the border one thinks of abbé Haristoy of Ciboure, abbé Etcheverri, canons Adéma and Inchauspé, abbé Harriet (all known to Webster, some he counted as friends) ; on the Spanish side obvious names include Resurrección María

de Azkue (first president of the Academy of the Basque Language and "the Pope of Basque studies"), José de Ariztimuno Olaso (the founder of the Basque youth movement Euskaltzaleak and a Basque Nationalist Party activist shot by Spanish fascists in 1936), Manuel Lekuona (a pioneer folklorist in the Spanish Basque country)... [10]

However, it is noteworthy that, compared with other regions and nations, a surprisingly large number of non-Basques were involved in the cultivation of Basque culture. Apart from Abbadie, Webster's most important contacts were with Julien Vinson, a Pondicherry born but Paris based linguist [11], Willem Van Eys, a Dutch professor of linguistics, Hugo Schuchardt who taught linguistics at the University of Graz, and Prince Louis-Lucien Bonaparte (who lived mostly in London) [12]. As this list implies, comparative linguistics remained absolutely central to Basque studies. In addition Webster was still in contact with many people in Oxford, which then was, in the words of one French observer, "a leading centre of Bascology", partly due to the Earl of Macclesfield's collection of Basque manuscripts held at Shirburn Castle [13]. Oxford bascophiles and Webster contacts included Archibald Sayce, professor of Assyriology, John Rhys, professor of Celtic, and Edward Spencer Dodgson, Oxford resident, Basque linguist and notorious sexual tourist. All of these people (perhaps with the exception of Rhys) stayed with Webster for extended periods and corresponded with him about things Basque. He had the great advantage over them that he was "on the spot". Clearly one did not have to be Basque to be interested in Basque, nor to take an active role in preserving and propagating Basque culture.

Missionaries and vernacular culture

The primary role of outsiders in the cultivation of national culture does fit with another group of nineteenth-century cultural activists, missionaries. Webster was himself a kind of missionary, even if his primary role was to minister to the Anglican populations of Biarritz and then Saint-Jean-de-Luz. It is not entirely clear who paid his salary while he was chaplain, but it was probably the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, who took ownership of the chapel when he retired. He also assisted the British and Foreign Bible Society in their translations of the gospels into Basque dialects. I think it very unlikely that he actually distributed these publications in the Basque country (as George Borrow had done in the First Carlist War: Webster knew some of Borrow's acquaintances, both in Spain and in England) [14]. Such direct proselytism would have destroyed his good relations with the local Catholic clergy. However, he did help make it possible for the Society to evangelize in the Basque country. He also toured some of the few remaining Protestant communities in the Pyrenees (not Basque in this case, but Navarese) as a visiting minister. He was certainly on good terms with the local Protestant minister in Osse, Alfred Cadier [15]. Missionary activity was probably a small part of his career, but he had some experience in this field.

Even if he was not an active missionary himself, Webster certainly knew about their activities, their interest in language questions, as well as their contributions to anthropological and folkloric debates on culture. He was in contact with British missionaries and clerics with missionary interests. He had a long correspondence with John Campbell of the Montreal Presbyterian College, who was one of the leading proponents of the idea that the native American populations of the Atlantic seaboard had possessed a written language. Webster

was also the biographer of Ashton Oxenden, bishop of Montreal, who was deeply involved with the Anglican missions in Canada before he retired to the Basque country [16]. He was therefore aware of the ideas that missionaries had developed through engagement with societies that had only a limited written culture of their own, which was also the situation in the Basque country.

I mention these connections because there is an automatic assumption that when dealing with missionaries' conceptions of culture and nationhood, that what one is witnessing is the imposition of European ideas of what constitutes a language, an ethnicity, a political nation, on non-European societies to which such concepts were not really appropriate. However, in what historians have learnt to think of as an "entangled world", it may be that the influences worked in the opposite direction, and that concepts of nationhood and ethnicity derived from missionaries' experiences overseas were re-imported to Europe. Perhaps Webster's ideas about the Basques were in part shaped by his knowledge of missionary language work. I am not actually proposing that European nationalisms were the result of missionaries' ideas, but I do think that the role of clerics in the cultivation of culture, and the extent to which they were influenced by the work of overseas missions, is a subject worthy of further investigation [17].

The "Basque Question"

The reason why so many people were writing to Webster, visiting Webster, asking his opinion, was because of his expertise on the "Basque Question". It was this that entitled him to his Civil List pension, Gladstone having previously carted away a pile of his articles on this or that aspect of Basque culture. The "Basque Question" was a hot topic in the nineteenth century – obviously not as big as the "Social Question", not as violent as the "Irish Question", more of an intellectual question, though one whose answer would have political consequences.

Who were the Basques and where did they come from? That was the essence of the Basque Question. But to understand why it exercised so many people in the nineteenth century one needs to appreciate the sense of vertigo that Victorians experienced as they realized that the history of the earth, and the history of the human race, were much longer than the Biblical chronology with which they had grown up. They had to adapt to geological time. "Yesterday" wrote Webster in an article on the Basques for the *Nouvelle Revue* in 1881, "the age of the habitable earth was no more than ten thousand centuries ; now our horizon extends well beyond the point to which we assigned the origin of man on our planet." [18] (Note that this article had nothing to do with geology: Webster introduced this geological reference himself in order to provide the context in which the "Basque Question" might be posed.) There were now vast epochs in the history of man, in the settlement of continents, in the origins of culture and religion, which were completely unknown. Archaeological discoveries were pushing back the boundaries of ignorance in India, Mesopotamia and Egypt, but the pre-history of Europe remained a blank. How was it to be filled ?

The answer appeared to lie in philology, the universal science of the early nineteenth century. From the end of the eighteenth century the quality and quantity of philological

scholarship was rapidly revealing the connections between most European languages, and between them and Asian languages both ancient and modern. There was, according to the leading philologist Jacob Grimm, a "tree of languages" (he was not the first to use this metaphor, but he was the person who popularized it): the modern languages of Europe, Persia and northern India were the branches, but the root was ancient Indo-European. Tracing the origins of existing languages was an exercise in time travel, for as George Dasent, an English Grimmian, put it, "the history of a race is, in fact, the history of its language" [19]. Through language one could trace the development of ideas about family, social hierarchy, technology, religious conceptions, and so forth. But the Grimms had gone one step further: they had discovered not just the history of indo-European languages but also the history of indo-European literatures. The tales they collected in nineteenth-century Hesse were clearly related to the tales told in every other nation on the Indo-European tree of languages: "because we find these tales and exactly the same kinds spread throughout Europe, thus revealing a kinship among the noblest peoples" as they put it in the preface to the first (1812) edition [20]. All Europeans shared this heritage because they had all carried it with them on their separate migrations out of Asia into Europe. Therefore the contents of this literature were very, very old. One could examine this literature as an archaeologist, looking for traces of the beliefs of distant ancestors. Folktales were, in fact, nothing less than fragments of the ancient Indo-European mythology, its protagonists the descendants of the ancient Indo-European pantheon.

Basque, however, did not fit anywhere onto this tree of languages, as Jacob Grimm himself realized. The Basques, then, had not travelled out of central Asia with the Latins, Celts, and Teutons. If "the history of a race is, in fact, the history of its language", then the Basques must have had a different history to that of their neighbours. Nineteenth-century philologists knew from classical authors that before the arrival of the Celts, the first western Europeans who could definitely be identified as Indo-Europeans, that the land had been occupied by other peoples such as the Etruscans, the Ligurians and most importantly the Iberians. Wilhelm von Humboldt, the great German linguist, identified the Iberians with the Basques [21]. Some elements of this population had been conquered and either been destroyed or assimilated, but others had, in the words of Jacob Grimm, "rescued themselves on the hills above the tide of the invading Indo-European languages". Basque, then, was presumed to be a descendant of the languages spoken by the pre-Celtic, pre-Indo-European inhabitants of western Europe. If so, it might also contain the history of this civilisation, waiting to be unlocked. Or as Webster put it, using the geological analogies that were part of the common scientific parlance of the time, "just as the geologist can make out and reconstitute a submerged continent thanks to the rare islets and the rocks that still rise above the waves, so the archaeologist, from the debris of the ancient peoples who emerge here and there from the great Aryan ocean, can conjecture the primitive civilisation of prehistoric Europe." [22]

The Basques might be the European racial and cultural substratum. Victorians seem to have been fascinated with this race and its fate. For instance, one interpretation of fairy belief (and fairies haunted Victorian Britain) was that it was a folk memory of the existence of another population that had, for a while, lived alongside the Celtic invaders [23]. Sir Laurence Gomme, President of the London Folklore Society, argued that the origins of Aryan

political institutions arose out of the need of the more civilized invaders to control the dangerous, aboriginal inhabitants of these Isles (some of whom, he believed, could still be found at the end of the nineteenth century in the less well-governed corners of the kingdom) [24]. In the 1870s and 80s there was a lengthy discussion in the London Anthropological Institute and in the periodical press about the "Black Kelts", the Silures of South Wales, a tribe identified by the Roman invaders as smaller and darker than the other Celtic populations of the British Isles. Were they of Iberian origin, and in that case were they related to the Basques ? Many of the luminaries of evolutionary thought – Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, John Beddoe – felt the need to contribute their views on the Black Kelts, and what their presence in the British racial mix might mean. Webster too presented a paper to the Anthropological Institute on this issue. Although he was a strong upholder of Humboldt's theory of the common identity of the modern Basques and the ancient Iberians, he argued that there was no connection between the Basque and the Celt, black or otherwise. There was no evidence that the Iberian civilisation had ever advanced north of the Adour, and therefore, whatever the racial substrate was in the British Isles, it was not related to the Basques [25]. (As it happens modern genetics suggests Webster was wrong about that – Basques and the Insular Celts are quite strongly related.)

Such debates were not just of academic interest: they clearly related to Europeans' engagement with non-European peoples in the age of empire. Even closer to home, in Ireland, discourses on race played an important role in politics: the Celt, one was told, was naturally emotional and lacked forethought ; he needed the steadying influence of Teutonic (that is British) government. Yet one should not exaggerate the importance that the participants attached to concepts of race: they were not all purveyors of crude racialist ideologies. As Chris Manias has recently shown, nineteenth-century archaeologists, anthropologists and folklorists mostly accepted that modern populations were the result of numerous inter-racial fusions and exchanges [26]. They were interested in the process but they did not all necessarily attach great significance to which blood line was preponderant.

The problem their theories pose to the modern reader is the tight link they draw between culture (and specifically language) and common descent. Intellectually Huxley, Spencer and for that matter Webster all knew that culture was a mobile commodity and that people who spoke the same language might have no common ancestry (and vice-versa). As Archibald Sayce put it, in the debate that followed Webster's paper on "Black Kelts", "Not only do I fully agree with Prince Lucien Bonaparte that the philologist who makes language the test of race is a bold man, but I would go further and say that language cannot be the test of race at all, but only of social contact." [27] Nonetheless in practice many participants used language as a marker of shared descent, and even of inherited moral qualities. The language issue in the Basque country was already becoming politicized. In a paper presented to the Congress of the Société d'ethnographie nationale (which Webster helped to organize) at Saint-Jean-de-Luz in 1897, Arturo Campion, who would turn from Basque linguistics to Basque nationalist politics in the twentieth century, wrote that all the good qualities of the Basques were bound to their language: "Physically, the offspring of Basque speakers who themselves do not speak Basque belong to the same race: but however, they have lost something: they have changed souls!" [28]

Another problem with this discussion of prehistorical racial interactions was that it

highlighted an unresolved intellectual problem in nineteenth-century British anthropology. The ideas of Edward Tylor, James Fraser and the like had much in common with the stadial theories of human social development put forward by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Ferguson: that all human societies advance from savage, to barbaric, to civilized. Therefore, the common features that one finds in many, widely separated cultures, do not necessarily derive either from a shared cultural descent, or from subsequent interaction between cultures: rather because all humans are psychologically much of a muchness, they all respond to natural phenomena in much the same way, and so human societies develop on much the same lines. The fact that most numbering systems in all parts of the world are decimal, for example, is because we all first learnt to count with our fingers. But how does a society develop from one stage to the next? Is the motor built in (as in the Marxist variant on stadial theory), or is change initiated by some exogenous factor ? Both Tylor and Fraser sometimes argued that it could be intrinsic to the nature of man in society: there was no requirement for outside stimulus. But at times they also connected cultural developments to the history of racial interactions ; technological and intellectual change arose from invasion. Bronze succeeded flint, and iron succeeded bronze, not through an internal process of self-discovery, but through conquest by other races, a more Darwinian conflict that would see the triumph of the fittest and the extinction of the inferior. In which case where did that leave the Basques: were they also, like the Iroquois to whom some linguists believed them to be related, a "vanishing race", "un peuple qui s'en va" as the geographer and communard Elisée Reclus termed them [29] ? Yet by most nineteenth-century anthropological measures of "civilisation" it was not at all obvious that Basques were either backward, nor that they were therefore fated for extinction. Many of the Bascologists discussed here commented on Basques' sense of superiority to their neighbours and not a few, including Webster, echoed the sentiment.

Theories of language

Despite arguments about the civilisational level of the Basques, everyone was agreed on one thing: the Basques were a remnant of the pre-Aryan population of Europe, and that their language and culture could reveal something about the history of this pre-Aryan population. If one could work out its relationship to other languages, for example, one could discover where they came from, and with whom they had interacted. The trouble was that Basque had no obvious close relations, and so very divergent views were offered by leading linguists, who also frequently changed their minds as well. Webster basically agreed with Max Müller, the great Oxford Sanskritist, who classified Basque as a Turanian language. Turan was a mythic ancestor of the Turks (and of Turandot, daughter of Turan), and the Turanian language family included not only Turkish, but all the Finno-Ugric and Mongolian languages, Korean, Japanese, some of the languages of the Philippines and Southern India, and also of North America. But even within this enormous group, was Basque more closely connected to Iroquois or to Finno-Ugric ? There were divergent views on the matter: Webster, like Sayce, gave support to the Finno-Ugric argument advanced by Prince Bonaparte, but nonetheless felt the allure of the Iroquois hypothesis, advanced by his Canadian contact John Campbell. And then there was a third view, most actively argued by his close friend Antoine d'Abbadie, that Basque was a Hamitic language (Ham being, like Shem who gives us Semitic, a son of

Noah). The family tree of this language group had been put together by a different Müller, the linguist Friedrich Müller, and it linked a rather diverse set of African and Mediterranean cultures and languages – the Berber, the Masai, the Tutsi and so on, who were supposed to display a cultural and physical superiority to their African neighbours. The Hamitic tribes were the warrior pastoralists who lorded it over Bantu agriculturalists. Abbadie, who had made his career as an explorer in Ethiopia, had perceived certain shared features between the languages he encountered there and his native Basque. (Schuchardt and Hyde Clarke, both correspondents of Webster, also supported an African origin for Basque.) Neither term, Turanian or Hamitic, is currently used in linguistics or in anthropology, but certainly the latter has passed into common usage in Africa. Outdated linguistics lingered in mission schools in places like Rwanda, and contributed to the belief that Hutu and Tutsi were racially divided.

There is a further theory, which Webster mentions without necessarily ascribing to it, which is that the similarities between Basque and other languages had nothing to do with shared descent. An agglutinative language like Basque was a marker of social evolution: all peoples, and all languages, had gone through an agglutinative stage, just as all peoples had gone through a stone age, on their way to higher technologies [30].

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Basque Legends and Basque mythology

The real prize would be the discovery of Basque pre-Christian mythology, and following the Grimms the assumption was that this could be found in Basque folktales. As Webster put it in 1874, “these Old Wives’ tales might contain facts or information that predate not only the coming of Christianity, but also the invasions of the Romans, the Greeks, the Carthaginans, even the great invasion of the Celts, that predate the arrival of any Aryan race in western Europe. It is possible, I don’t say that it’s probable, but it is possible that the most ancient of these Basque traditions stands in relation to the Celts and Aryans as the traditions of the Akkadians and Sumerians do to the traditions of the Semites.’’ [31] Before that time there was no collection of Basque folktales: all the Bascophiles felt its necessity, but none seemed to be in the position to compile it. They were in London, or Oxford, or Amsterdam, or Vienna. Even if one was on the spot, it was difficult to envisage the circumstances that would enable one to collect a folktale from a Basque mountaineer. The nearest thing to an edition of Basque folklore was the collection put together by the Bordeaux school-inspector Cerquand, who instructed teachers in the Basque country to collect tales from their pupils. However, Webster was not convinced by this method:”I am not completely persuaded that teachers are, in general, the best collectors of legends and popular tales. Their reputation as men of science scares country people. In order that they tell you the best of these legends, you must appear to believe in them, or at least take a serious interest“ [32]. Teachers, at least according to the mythology of the Third Republic, were too hostile to local languages

and vernacular knowledge in general to fulfil this role. Abbadie, Vinson and Webster had long epistolary discussions about the desirability of discovering a folkloric source, but they had come to no practical resolution. Basques, they agreed, were wary of outsiders, especially if discussing anything that trespassed on religion, or which might affect their highly developed sense of amour-propre. Abbadie was delighted to receive a tale concerning a Tartaro (a Cyclops) from a priest who had got it from a parishioner, and he sent it straight off for publication by the local *société savante* at Bayonne. But that was it: and time was pressing, for all assumed that with railways, tourists and paraffin lamps, folktales were fast disappearing. Indeed, according to Abbadie,"With our Basques they are in their death agony, and must die soon. Therefore it is now or never to make the harvest, in order to elucidate the great problem of the origin of nations." [33]

In 1874, however, Webster "unexpectedly discovered a fund of Basque folk-lore", as he put it in a letter to Sayce. The family's new maid, Estefanella Hirigaray, normally known as Stephana, from the village of Ahetze, knew no French and was therefore culturally pristine (even if her village was less than 10 kilometres from Biarritz), and she knew an awful lot of stories. They were, he told Sayce, "genuine specimens of folklore which the peasants tell each other while husking the maize etc in winter" [34]. The tales that Stephana told Webster were the first he collected for what would become the *Basque Legends*. Webster did not always name the narrator of the tales either in the published book or in his manuscript notes [35], but Stephana was certainly his first and his most forthcoming informant. Her name appears beneath thirteen out of eighty-nine tales, and she was, one can reasonably deduce, the informant for half a dozen others. We can also surmise that she introduced Webster to other storytellers, starting with her sister Gagna-Haurra (Jeanne) Hirigaray [36].

Nineteenth-century folklore collections, in France at least, almost always start from the master-servant relationship. Only a few years earlier the two leading French folklorists of the Third Republic, Paul Sébillot and Emmanuel Cosquin, were looking up their old nursemaids to see if they could still remember any of the stories they had told the infant male bourgeois [37]. One might assume, then, that this was a very exploitative relationship: Webster's use of the term "fund" of folklore, as if Stephana was merely a vessel, might support this assumption. In the review of Cerquand's collection, which he wrote at the same time that he was recording Stephana's tales, he elaborated on this notion of storyteller as custodian: "in each family or in each circle of friends there is one outstanding storyteller. One must find him, or her, this poet without knowing it, this artless artist, this historian without writing, this guardian of treasures whose value they don't even suspect." [38]

However, whatever the other qualities of Stephana as a storyteller, Stephana's tales did not really answer the need for a Basque mythology. Webster had thought that her protagonists, such as the Basa-Jauna (Wild Man), the Heren-Suge (the Seven-Headed Dragon), and the Laminak (fairies) might offer a basis for elaborating such a mythology, but in practice the tales were part of the common repertoire of most of western Europe. Although there were a few features that were particular to Basque oral culture, such as the role taken by the Tartaro or Cyclops as the universal baddie, as a rule these distinctive Basque characters were incorporated into standard plot developments, so there was not much to separate Basque tales from those of the surrounding Celto-Latin populations. The degree to which the material was shared across linguistic boundaries was not apparent to Webster in the 1870s,

as very few French or Spanish tale collections had been published at that time. Folklore really took off in those countries in the 1870s and 80s. However, by 1905, when he wrote his entry on Basque mythology for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, he was forced to conclude "There is no aid to be got from Folk-lore tales. None can be considered exclusively Basque, and the literature is altogether too modern" [39].

The universal features of Basque folklore only became apparent in time. The initial problem with the *Basque Legends* was Webster's manner of interpretation. Webster tried to turn his Basque Cinderellas and Tom Thumbs into a pre-Christian pantheon by following the theories of the Oxford Sanskritist Max Müller. Müller, who in his day was as famous as Darwin, offered an explanation for the common Indo-European content of folktales in terms of a shared celestial mythology. The characters who appeared in the tales were all embodiments of one or other celestial phenomena – Little Red Riding Hood the dawn, Frau Holle clouds and so on. These mythologies had been relegated to peasant pastimes as a result of cultural devolution: from a higher cultural form (myth) to a lower one (folktale). The original inspiration for the myth was itself a type of cultural devolution, or what Müller termed a "disease of language". Later generations mistook their ancestor's metaphorical descriptions for expressions of a reality, and so converted their straightforward appreciation of natural phenomena into worship of the Gods who controlled those phenomena.

Celestial or solar mythology was inherently problematic. One could apply it to anything and come up with same result (a student journal published a paper in 1870 proving that Müller himself was a solar myth) [40] ; but at the same time different scholars examining the same material came up with entirely contradictory interpretations: Cinderella might be the dawn, or she might be rain, or she might be the morning star, and so on). However, the real difficulty with Webster's use of the theory is that, of course, Müller was only attempting to explain the primitive religious ideas of the Indo-Europeans. The point of studying the Basques was to discover something different from the Indo-European mainstream. Webster's analysis had placed them squarely within it.

By 1902 Webster had completely rejected Müller's theories, but given that this objection must have been obvious to him even in the 1870s, one might wonder why he was ever tempted by solar mythology. Certainly Müller was a dominant intellectual figure, particular in Oxford, to which location Webster naturally turned. But even in the 1870s, alternative theories were beginning to emerge from the comparative anthropology of Edward Tylor and Andrew Lang (both also Oxford men, though as far as I know Webster had no particular connection with either of them). Tylor (and even more definitely Andrew Lang, who cruelly lampooned Müller and his followers) saw folktales not as the remnants of a higher mythology that had devolved to the peasant but rather as survivals from a more savage age: fossilized relics of a more primitive epoch in human development. The process was reversed, rather than cultural devolution one was dealing with cultural evolution: tales contained the building blocks from which higher cultural phenomena, such as myths, were formed.

Given Webster's use of the "fossil" metaphor to describe the Basque language, one might have thought he would drawn to this "survivals in culture" approach, but this was not the case. There were reasons why the cultural evolutionism of Tylor and Lang could not appeal to a practicing Anglican priest. They were both (at the time, Lang was to change his views

later on) religious sceptics, and part of the purpose of their investigations into primitive culture was to demonstrate the entirely human origins of religious ideas. Müller, however, was a Christian, and while he was familiar with and to an extent accepted Darwinian evolution, he argued that Darwin could not account for the unique feature that separated human from all other life on the planet - language. Language must have been a divine gift, a Revelation. A "disease of language" might explain why humanity had fallen away from worshipping the one true God, but all had shared in the original knowledge of their creator. In Victorian Britain, Christians tended to be cultural devolutionists, explaining heathen pantheism and savage sorcery as a falling away from monotheism, as further proof of original sin. Sceptics like Tylor were cultural evolutionists, arguing that monotheism arose out of pantheism and magic (and implicitly that it was a cultural phase that might itself be superseded, by scientific rationalism). Webster, as we will see, experimented with the concept of survivals, but he did not accept the Godless implications of cultural evolution.

Survivals in culture

With the discrediting of Müller and the evidence that Basques and non-Basques alike shared a corpus of folktales, Webster seems to have lost his interest in Basque mythology. Moving with the intellectual current he too turned to "survivals in culture": if folkloric practices were like fossils, they too might allow access to the earlier cultural (and racial) layer of the European population.

The Basque country offered a wealth of material to the would-be comparative anthropologist. Webster wrote extensively on a number of them. He was fascinated by Basque dance traditions, and in particular by the totemic animal dances (which might have led him into the territory of Durkheim, Fraser and Van Gennep, but did not). And like all Bascophiles he had to deal with the supposed custom of the *couvade* [41]. This practice was attested by classical authors among the ancient populations of Iberia. After the mother had given birth, the father replaced her in bed and mimicked the process of giving birth. Thereafter he stayed in bed to recover while the woman got on with her normal chores. Apparently something similar has been observed in South American and South Asian populations (though whether this was because the observers were predisposed, thanks to their classical knowledge, to find the couvade in so-called primitive populations, is not clear to me). If Basques practiced the couvade, as was frequently stated, then their supposed racial and cultural relationship to the ancient Iberians would be strengthened. Many travel writers claimed that the custom was practiced in the Basque country, but whenever one followed up their sources they all led back to the same classical authorities. There were hoax accounts, some of which still surface in the anthropological literature even today. Webster first fell for, and later exposed, one such hoax. With some reluctance Webster pronounced himself a Basque couvade sceptic [42].

Another survival which Webster pursued was the improvised lament for the dead. The lament, performed by semi-professional female mourners, was a subject that obsessed nineteenth-century cultural historians, partly because it was so well attested in classical times. The lament as a contemporary practice was regularly advanced as evidence of an ancient cultural lineage — so Greek, Irish and Baltic folklorists enthused over the lament as

evidence of their cultures' enduring relationship to the classical past. But to other observers the practice seemed a throw-back to a more barbaric stage of civilization: after all the classical authors who discuss the lament mostly did so to condemn it, as did all the Councils of the early Church. In Francesco Rosi's film of *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, for example, the final lament scene observed by Carlo Levi is a demonstration of his thesis that history, even Christianity, has by-passed the peasants of southern Italy: they live in a more primitive, harsher, hopeless world of pain and sorrow.

As far as Webster was aware, public, paid-for, improvised lament poetry was only practiced in two villages of the Pyrenees in his lifetime, Osse and Lescun, which were not actually in the Basque country but in neighbouring Béarn. They were, however, the nearest Romance language villages to the Basques, so Webster seems to have thought of them as honorary Basques, especially as they were keeping up a custom that was recorded among the ancient Iberians [43]. The custom had finally been stamped out in Osse in the 1860s by a newly arrived Protestant schoolteacher. "All this", wrote Webster, "is nothing but the long death agony of traditional customs that have their roots in paganism" [44].

The survivals that interested him most were Basque practices of land-tenure and self-government, the two being intimately linked. He was fascinated by the way that communal land was organized, and explicitly located Basque practices in a cultural evolutionary hierarchy. In some parts of the Spanish Pyrenees, for example, all land was communal, even the in-field arable lands, which were divided by lot among households every year. More common were the communes which managed pastures and meadows collectively but arable land was held privately. Between the two Webster believed was a process of cultural evolution: the first was the regime of a tribe, and therefore archaic, but the second 'one might call that a little state, a Republic, as people so proudly say' in the Pyrenees [45]. In between the two, in terms of cultural development, he placed two other features of Basque social life: the "house community" (what demographers would call a communauté type household), and the unique system of First Neighbours, in which each Basque villager had a very clearly defined set of obligations to the neighbouring farm to the left [46]. It was the little valley Republics that particularly intrigued Webster, with their written constitutions (*fors* or *fueros*), their treaties (or *faceries*) of war and peace with neighbouring valleys, their rules of administrative and judicial conduct (for example, banning all clerics and all lawyers from taking part in decision making, of which he heartily approved), the equal role played by women in many aspects of Basque familial and communal self-government.

Sometimes Webster seems to grasp that these different forms of social organisation did not so much represent stages in the cultural development of mankind but rather were responses to particular physical and economic environments. However, while he located these forms of land settlement in a ladder of stadial progression, and clearly thought of the maintenance of such customs as "survivals in culture" (hence his discussion of them falls under the heading "archaeology", even though they were contemporary with him), he turned the logic of progress on its head. For the Pyrenean valley Republics were, in his view, much better governed than those under the tutelage of either the Spanish or French national governments with their more "modern" expectations of absolute personal property. "The Basques", he wrote, "even under the government of a monarchy, have maintained all the rights and liberties of a real Republic. Everything is done by the people, for the people, by all

for all, and not only for the advantage of the higher classes." On occasions he reminds one of Alexis de Tocqueville: "This daily practical experience, this continual custom of 'self-government', is worth, in our opinion, all the otherwise vaunted benefits of the most advanced civilisation." [47]

And, what is more, it was a custom from which so-called more advanced civilisations might learn. In his study of Simon de Montfort as Governor of Gascony, Webster argued it was this first-hand experience of dealing with self-governing communities that had given Montfort the idea for his reform of the English Parliament to include representatives not only of the First and Second Estates but also the towns, thus earning him the title "the father of the House of Commons". Elements of the "fueros" had been translated by Montfort into *Magna Carta*, the charter of rights drawn up between rebel barons and King John near Windsor in 1215. Thus the Basque village was the ancestor of the mother of parliaments and the rights of "freeborn Englishmen". This turned Victorian racial anthropology on its head, and was a direct rejection of the widespread notion that English liberties were a Saxon inheritance, and that the previous Celtic and the pre-Indo-European inhabitants of the British Isles had not only been unable, but were also unfit for, free institutions. "The great historical fact which I am attempting to establish in this essay is this – that constitutional and representational liberty, the liberty which respects the rights of others, as well as one's own, is not as is often asserted, the exclusive appanage of the Teutonic races ; and that the so-called Latin races [nothing can be more absurd than this title. In all the races of which I have here treated, excepting perhaps hte Basque, Keltic blood is predominant], are not incapable of it. On the contrary, these so-called Latin races enjoyed and practised these liberties long before they were introduced by the English." [48]

Again one might perceive the workings of a clerical mind here. Although he was using the language of evolution and "survivals in culture", Webster still thought in terms of cultural devolution. What came first was to be preferred because it was implicitly, or explicitly, closer to God. This may not have been a fully articulated intellectual position, but Webster's sympathies prevented him from accepting that whatever was more modern was therefore to be preferred. This may also have prevented him becoming more closely involved in the Folk-lore Society. When the Society was founded clerics, both those employed within the British Isles and as missionaries abroad, made up a significant proportion of its membership. However, as the leadership became more overtly committed to an evolutionary, materialist and atheistical position, some of this clerical support fell away. For example Gladstone, Webster's friend and patron, who also looked on myth and folklore as "the degraded remnants of revelation", resigned from the Society in 1896 after Edward Clodd's Presidential Address in which the latter explicitly argued that Christianity was a vehicle for savage survivals [49]. One can make too much of this divide: the Folk-Lore Society never gave exclusive allegiance to any one intellectual creed and it was certainly not impossible for Christians, and even clerics, to remain members. Archibald Sayce, Webster's correspondent and an ordained Anglican minister, not only retained his membership but served as Vice-President throughout this period. Nonetheless, although Webster kept abreast of developments in the new science of folklore, he could not accept its direction of travel. His outlook was more in keeping with an earlier generation of philological folklorists for whom it was easier to reconcile geological time-spans with the truth of Revelation through the

unique phenomenon of language.

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[1] Joseph Duloum, *Les Anglais dans les Pyrénées et les débuts du tourisme pyrénéen (1739-1896)*, Lourdes, Amis du Musée Pyrénéen, 1970.

[2] My thanks to the current vicar of St Andrews, the Anglican church of Pau, for supplying copies of these registers.

[3] See entry for Clarke in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

[4] Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, ed. Erwin Wentworth Webster, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1923.

[5] The relevant letters, from the Gladstone archive in the British Library, are reproduced as an appendix in André Duquenne, *Contribution à l'étude des anglais et des americains au pays basque: bibliographie méthodique informatisée*, Thèse de doctorat, Université de Pau et des Pays de L'Adour.

[6] Paul Delany, *George Gissing: A Life*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008, p. 360.

[7] For further biographical information see, in addition to Webster's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Philippe Veyrin, "Wentworth Webster", *Bulletin du Musée Basque*, 1-2 (1929), pp. 1-29 ; and Julio De UrquijoIbarra, "Vascófilos ingleses", *Revue internationale des études basques*, 25 (1935), pp. 200-224.

[8] *Légendes basques*, 2005 ; *Leyendas Vascas*, 1993 ; *Euskal Ipuinak*, 1993.

[9] The plaque reads "To Wentworth Webster, scholar and fervent friend of the Basques". My thanks to Leonore Schick for supplying me with a photo of this plaque.

[10] Paul Preston, *Revolution and War in Spain, 1931-1939*, London, Methuen, 1984, p. 185.

[11] Vinson was the dedicatee of Webster's *Les Loisirs d'un étranger au pays basque* (Chalon-sur-Saone, E. Bertrand, 1901).

[12] Philippe Veyrin, "Lettres du Prince Louis-Lucien Bonaparte à Wentworth Webster", *Revue internationale des études basques*, 25 (1934), pp. 316-333. Prince Bonaparte played a pivotal role in the encouragement of vernacular cultures in many parts of nineteenth-century Europe: one might consider him as the Bonaparte family's apology for the cultural imperialism of his uncle.

[13] Pierre Bidart, *La singularité basque*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2001, p. 193.

[14] Wentworth Webster, "Stray Notes on George Borrow's Life in Spain", *The Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, I (1888-1889), pp. 150-53.

[15] Alfred Cadier, *Osse: histoire de l'église réformée de la vallée d'Aspe*, Paris, Grassart, 1892, p. XIV.

[16] Ashton Oxenden, *Plain Sermons, with a memoir by W. Webster*, London, Longmans, 1893.

[17] This paper was originally prepared for a workshop held in Amsterdam in 2010 under the auspices of the Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms: **http://spinnet.eu/workshop-clerics-and-the-vernacular**

[18] Wentworth Webster, "Les Basques", *La Nouvelle Revue*, 10 (1881), pp. 344-374, 344.

[19] George WebbeDasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse. With an Introductory Essay on the Origin and Diffusion of Popular Tales*, 2nd edition, Edinburgh, Edmonston and Douglas, 1859, p. xx.

[20] Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, ed. Jack Zipes, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 7.

[21] Robert Lawrence Trask, *The History of Basque*, London, Routledge, 1997, p.53.

[22] Wentworth Webster, "Les Basques", *La Nouvelle Revue*, 10 (1881), pp. 344-374.

[23] Carole Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and the Victorian Consciousness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, chap. 4.

[24] Sir George Laurence Gomme, *Ethnology in Folklore*, London, Kegan Paul, 1892.

[25] Wentworth Webster, "The Basque and the Kelt: An Examination of Mr W. Boyd Dawkins' Paper "The Northern Range of the Basques" in the Fortnightly Review, September 1874", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 5 (1876), pp. 5-29.

[26] Chris Manias, *Race, Science, And the Nation: Reconstructing the Ancient Past in Britain, France and Germany*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013.

[27] Wentworth Webster, "The Basque and the Kelt: An Examination of Mr W. Boyd Dawkins' Paper "The Northern Range of the Basques" in the Fortnightly Review, September 1874", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 5 (1876), pp. 5-29, 25.

[28] Arturo Campion, "La langue basque", in *La Tradition au pays basque*, Société d'ethnographie nationale et d'art populaire, 1899, pp. 413-459.

[29] Elisée Reclus, "Les Basques: un peuple qui s'en va", *La Revue des deux mondes*, 15 March 1867, pp. 313-340. Reclus' argument, however, was less about "vanishing races" and more a paean to the processes of racial fusion.

[30] These various theories are discussed, and then demolished, in R.L. Trask, *A History of Basque*, Abingdon, Routledge, 1997.

[31] Wentworth Webster, Review of"Légendes et récits populaires du Pays basque par M. Cerquand, Inspecteur de l'Académie de Bordeaux", *Bulletin de la société Ramon*, Pau, October, 1875, pp. 167-174.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Antoine d'Abbadie,"Légende de Tartaroa ou Tartarua", *Bulletin de la Société des sciences et arts de Bayonne*, February 1875, pp.133-135.

[34] Bodleian MS Englett d. 62, Sayce letters, F 148 r.

[35] Webster's original manuscript is preserved in the Bibliothèque municipale de Bayonne.

[36] The complex history of Webster's manuscripts, their relation to the published English translation and Vinson's Basque manuscript edition, as well as the subsequent French and Spanish editions, is discussed in Natalia M. Zaïka, "Les contes de Webster: à la découverte du processus de la création", *Lapurdum*, 15 (2011).

[37] For more information on Stephana Hirigaray and other servant storytellers, see David Hopkin, "Intimacies and Intimations: Storytelling between Servants and Masters in Nineteenth-Century France and Beyond", in *Oral Tradition and Book Culture*, Helsinki, Studia Fennica Folkloristica, forthcoming.

[38] Wentworth Webster, Review of "Légendes et récits populaires du Pays basque par M. Cerquand, Inspecteur de l'Académie de Bordeaux", *Bulletin de la société Ramon*, Pau, October 1875, pp. 167-174.] However, I believe this became a rather important relationship for Webster, and that he had, or learnt to have, respect for Stephana. In another review written a year later, he commented on the claims of a British travel writer, Philip Hamerton, that in Britain "there is hardly any communication between servants and masters, and they generally know little of each other. If the master attempts to break down this reserve, then the servant will maintain it in self-defence and from a sense of propriety", but French servants do not have that sense of the division of classes, and therefore behave in inappropriate ways. Webster wrote "on one point we would reverse [Hamerton's] conclusions. It is the French servant to whom you can talk as to an equal and who no more thinks of taking a liberty with you than you with her who shows true self respect, and not the English one with her expression of surprise that you should address her as reasonable being..."[[Bodleian MS Engmisc d 104. Wentworth Webster Mss: "Nile Diary. Reviews 1876 to 1881". Review of "Round My House. Notes of rural life in France in Peace and War" by PG Hamerton, London, 1876' F44.

[39] Entry "Basques", *The Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th Edition, 1911, p 487.

[40] Anon. (Richard Frederick Littledale), "The Oxford Solar Myth", *Folklore Forum*, 6:2 (1973), pp. 68-74. Originally published in Kottabos (1870).

[41] Rodney Gallop, "'Couvade' and the Basques", *Folklore*, 47 (1936), pp. 310-313.

[42] The hoax appeared in the *Bulletin de la société des sciences, lettres et arts de Pau* (1877-1878), pp. 74-77, in a report supposedly written by M. Etchecopar, Ayherre's teacher, announcing that the couvade was practiced by a family in that village. The history of its exposure is given in Abbé Haristoy, "Rectification sur la couvade du pays basque", *La Tradition au pays basque*, Paris, La Tradition nationale, 1899, pp. 290-293.

[43] Bodleian MS Engmisc d 110.Wentworth Webster Mss: "Miscellaneous". Draft of "The Vallée d'Aspe, its Protestants and its Poetry", ff. 220-237. This article may have been published in the magazine *The Popular Educator* in 1873.

[44] Wentworth Webster, "Prudence et les Basques", *Bulletin Hispanique*, 5:3 (July-September 1903), p. 247. Prudentius was a late Latin poet who knew the Basque country and mentioned the lament tradition.

[45] Wentworth Webster, "Quelques notes archéologiquessur les moeurs et les institutions de la region pyrénéene", *Bulletin de la société des sciences et des arts de Bayonne*, 1884, p. 117.

[46] On which see Sandra Ott, "Blessed Bread, 'First Neighbours' and Asymmetric Exchange in the Basque Country", *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 21 (1980), pp. 40-58.

[47] Wentworth Webster, "Les Basques", *La Nouvelle Revue*, 10 (1881), pp. 344-374, 369.

[48] Wentworth Webster, “Simon de Montfort and the English Parliament 1248-1265”, *The Antiquary*, 1883, pp. 66-72, 236-241.

[49] Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1968, pp. 250-255.