

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

SHOWING THE GREEN

ENGLISH AND IRISH EYES ARE SMILING

As it turns out, the Irish may not be so different (at least genetically) from their rival southern neighbors.
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ON ST. PATRICK'S DAY, everybody is Irish — except perhaps the English, who for centuries have celebrated the fact that their Anglo-Saxon nation was a race apart from the Celtic inhabitants of the Emerald Isle. And the feeling of foreignness has been mutual. As Winston Churchill is said to have observed: "We have always found the Irish a bit odd. They refuse to be English."

Now, however, a spoilsport scientist is disputing the notion of Irish exceptionalism. Oxford University geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer has concluded that, for the most part, Englishmen and Irishmen come from the same stock. In a new book, "The Origins of the British: A Genetic Detective Story," Oppenheimer concludes: "The majority of the gene pool of the British Isles is very ancient and dates to the era after the last great Ice Age. It has nothing to do with Celts or Anglo-Saxons or any more recent ethnic labels." One of the British Isles, of course, is Ireland.

Moreover, that single population apparently has its roots not in Northern or Central Europe, the presumed homelands, respectively, of the Germanic and Celtic "races," but in what is now Spain. According to this reconstruction, most of the ancestors of Britons and Irish alike spoke a language related to Basque. Their descendants, however, adopted the languages of successive invaders — first Celtic languages, then Germanic ones.

If Oppenheimer and his colleagues are correct, there is egg (or DNA) on the face of not just the Irish, who romanticize their fatalistic and poetic "race," but also of English people — and their American descendants — who exult in their "Anglo-Saxon" origins. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," the bombastic Tom Buchanan puts it this way: "This idea is that we're Nordics ... and we've produced all the things that go to make civilization — oh, science and art, and all that."

Of course, it was obvious long before the discovery of DNA that two peoples could be related by blood and separated by religion, history or culture. But the idea that cultural differences are "in the blood" is deeply ingrained. Just ask Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who famously attributed a Latina legislator's fiery personality to a mixture of "black blood" and "Latino blood."

DNA seems to tell a different tale. So the English can join their Irish cousins in celebrating the feast of St. Patrick — who, by the way, was apparently born in England.