

# H-Net Reviews

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**Kevin Kenny, ed.** *Ireland and the British Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 296 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925183-4.

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Was Ireland a kingdom or a colony? Or, especially after the creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801, was it central or peripheral? For a generation of scholars of early modern and modern Ireland, these have been the perennial questions regarding Ireland's status within the British empire. And until we are satisfied with the apparently paradoxical answer, "both and neither," these questions will continue to burn. Kevin Kenny's edited collection of essays on *Ireland and the British Empire* will, therefore, go a long way toward ending the current debate; for it is the central conclusion of almost all of the contributors, including Kenny himself, that the either/or approach cannot lead to resolution. This is because arguments resolutely for or against Ireland's colonial status are based upon an ideal form of colony which did not, in fact, exist. Instead, almost all the contributors agree that Ireland's status within the British empire was constitutionally ambiguous, its inhabitants were frequently ambivalent, and its position within the empire was, for better and worse, unique.

Indeed, the idea of ambivalence is struck at the very outset of the book and, in an arresting way, in the foreword written by Nicholas Canny. Canny, a seminal figure in the "kingdom or colony" debate, tells the story of two humble Irish Catholics, one man and one woman, who found employment and social opportunity within the British imperial administration prior to, during, and even after the protracted separation of southern Ireland from the United Kingdom in the first half of the twentieth century. Neither person was an ardent Unionist or an avid Republican. Instead, as Canny says, "each experienced conflicts of loyalty and allegiance but in neither instance is there the slightest hint that such conflicts tempted them to become subversives" (p. xvii). What makes Canny's stories so arresting is that both of the peo-

ple about whom he writes were his relatives. And while Canny denies that either one was necessarily typical—in career or attitude—of an Irish person from a poor or modest background, he seems to suggest that the very existence of two such people in his own extended family (one paternal, one maternal) might indicate the existence of a much larger, if heretofore rarely discussed, group within Irish history. More overtly, and more importantly, Canny calls for other people to reconstruct their own family histories so that future scholars will have a better sense of what was and was not a typical experience or attitude of poor or lower-middle-class Irish people in and towards the British empire. Until that happens, we will have this book, among others, to help us answer our questions.

Kenny begins the chapters with an excellent overview of Irish history within the British empire and, importantly for those who are familiar with the *Oxford History of the British Empire (OHBE)*, briefly explains how and why this companion volume is different and necessary, even though Ireland was the focus of six chapters within the original five-volume set. In short, Ireland was far too important to be left out of a comprehensive study of the British empire, so much so that six chapters scattered over five volumes were thought not comprehensive enough. Thus, we have this book, as well as other companion volumes on such topics as gender and race. Jane Ohlmeyer, who also contributed a chapter to volume 1 of *OHBE*, follows Kenny's introduction with one of the book's more impressive chapters in which she writes very clearly about ambiguity. Like Canny, Ohlmeyer situates early modern Irish history within a British Atlantic context, and in the process shows how Irish Catholics were victims of English (and later British) imperialism, but also enterprising participants within the empire, both

at home and abroad. The “Atlantic” approach to Irish history, which sees Ireland as a laboratory for later imperial expansion, tends to tie Irish history into that of North America and the Caribbean, but in this article Ohlmeyer shows that Irish imperial interests extended as far and wide as the empire itself, and thus to South America, Asia and Africa, while Irish merchants also contributed to Continental European trading networks. What, then, was the story of empire in Ireland for Ohlmeyer? It was “complex, full of contradictions, and in several respects unique” (p. 58).

In considering Ireland’s fate, Ohlmeyer asks how it could have been different given the island’s proximity to England and the strategic threat it represented to England throughout the early modern period. This is precisely the question that Thomas Bartlett asks in his chapter on the eighteenth century, and what he finds when exploring the Irish-British relationship is also ambiguity. “Without doubt,” says Bartlett, “Ireland benefited from the imperial connection in the eighteenth century.... Yet Irish gains from transatlantic trade did not enter deep enough into the Irish economy to foster self-sustaining development” (p. 68). As Bartlett points out, this was the opposite of what happened in Scotland, where the transatlantic tobacco trade was so lucrative that it helped to capitalize ancillary industries and establish the need for sophisticated financial services, which in turn positively affected the entire Scottish economy. And of course, Scotland’s financial success had much to do with its acceptance of the Union with England. Without such wealth, the Irish tended to be less enthusiastic, especially the Catholic Irish. True, the Union of Great Britain and Ireland provided new opportunities within the empire for Irish Catholics after 1800, but the Union itself was never as popular in Ireland as the imperial rewards it brought. This was clearly a problem in the long run, because to like the effect of something but not its cause is to live with a dangerous, and perhaps untenable, contradiction.

It would be redundant at this point to examine in detail each essay in this volume that affirms the book’s essential thesis about the complexity, ambiguity and uniqueness of Ireland’s status within the British empire, which is precisely what Kenny, Alvin Jackson, and Deirdre McMahon do in their respective chapters on “The Irish in the Empire,” “Ireland the Union and Empire, 1800-1960,” and “Ireland, the Empire and the Commonwealth.” This is not to say that these are unimportant contributions. Kenny’s essay is yet another even-handed contribution from the editor in which one learns that as a proportion of the overall population, Portuguese emigra-

tion levels in the twentieth century exceeded those of Ireland, as well as the fact that more southern Irishmen fought in World War II (43,000) than did Northern Irishmen (38,000). This book is full of such significant facts and statistics, which fly in the face of commonly held Irish and Northern Irish historical assumptions. Jackson’s stylish essay, for example, will unnerve as many Unionists as Nationalists for the pieties it questions and just as frequently rejects. This is no easy feat, and one which is to be applauded. McMahon’s essay is perhaps less successful than the others, for lack of a clear thesis, but it too has its slyly subversive moments, such as when she concludes in wondering whether the Republic of Ireland should rejoin the Commonwealth.

If there is a thematic division in the volume, it arises from whether the author’s primary focus is on the more traditional domains of history, such as politics, trade, economics and emigration, or the historical artifact called literature. While the previously mentioned authors were concerned with the former, Vera Kreilkamp, Joe Cleary and Stephen Howe are more interested in the latter. Consequently, these three essays speak to each other more than to the chronologically arranged historical essays, and in that sense might have been given a separate section within the volume under the sub-title, “The Colonial/Post-Colonial Literary Debate.”

That said, not all literary theorists are set against the historians. Kreilkamp, for example, focuses on the “Big House” novels (i.e.: novels using Anglo-Irish landowners’ houses as setting and metaphor) of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and concludes that “Irish fiction significantly complicates the binary structures of a post-colonial emphasis on metropolitan centre and periphery” (p. 181). In short, she finds that Ireland was neither fully central nor peripheral, or, in longer historical terms, it was neither kingdom nor colony. Joe Cleary disagrees, and his chapter on “Postcolonial Ireland” comes closest of all to directly challenging the volume’s overall thesis. Cleary claims that Irish postcolonial literary analysis is not a “renovated cultural nationalism” but the “most expansive and outward-looking of the various modes of socio-cultural analysis currently shaping Irish studies” (p. 252). He acknowledges that there was no classic colonial model against which to compare Ireland, but rejects this criticism as grounds upon which to dismiss colonial/post-colonial analysis because Ireland shared many of the “colonial structures, legacies and dilemmas” (p. 253), in variant forms, with other British colonies. This, of course, is where the argument gets slippery, because without strict or established definitions of

what was or was not “colonial,” everything or nothing becomes possible. Nevertheless, Cleary argues his point forcefully, although some of his colonial comparisons fail under the weight of scrutiny. For example, state formation and eventual partition in Ireland is hardly comparable with that of Cyprus and Palestine, as Cleary asserts. True, India merits a comparison because Britain had long been involved in governing the subcontinent, although strictly speaking the British government did not rule over India until 1858. Cyprus and Palestine, however, were acquired in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, respectively. Britain ultimately had very little interest in either territory, and there was essentially no resident British population outside of a very small administration. This could hardly be more different from Ireland, where there was nearly eight hundred years of administrative interference and control by England (and later Britain), and just as many years of British settlement and attempts at cultural transformation. However, if we accept Cleary’s very broad brush strokes as legitimate, his colonial/post-colonial model holds up and in the process illuminates aspects of Irish culture and history. But are his strokes too broad? Or, to continue the metaphor, does he paint Ireland with the same a colonial brush as India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Jamaica, etc., and then proclaim to his audience that, by virtue of its similar color, Ireland is obviously a colony? Clearly, some literary theorists and so-called “revisionist” historians would think so.

One might say that Stephen Howe comes to the rescue at this point, and that the volume should have concluded with his essay, rather than place it in the awkward penultimate position. Howe is a cultural historian with a particular interest in literature, and thus maps out the heated historiographical terrain of the last three decades with a particular emphasis on the struggle for narrative supremacy between the “colonial/post-colonial” literary theorists and the so-called “revisionist” historians. Howe seems to have read every recent cultural study of Ireland and of the British empire, no matter how large or small, and with this impressive background he tackles his subject from a breathtakingly wide perspective. Echoing the other historians in the volume, he asserts that “this

need not be an either/or argument,” and maintains this assertion by walking very carefully down the middle of a rocky road, while deconstructing the growls and catcalls of the antagonists on either side (p. 227). Howe claims that, in the final analysis, Irish colonial cultural theorists are guilty of a “strange, almost oxymoronic combination of assumptions about global sameness and about Irish uniqueness.... Even so, Irish colonial and postcolonial cultural theory might be welcomed as offering the potential for a wider international perspective than had often been evident in the Irish studies of the past” (p. 246). It is, one might say, a happy ending, and one which lives up to the editor’s assertion that the book “moves beyond two conceptions that stand at the opposite extremes in much popular and academic discourse” (p. 1). Indeed, the book as a whole tends to walk the middle path. In that sense, some would argue that it merely summarizes the debate without advancing it, but I would suggest that splitting the difference, in a dialectical sense, is a form of advancement.

The volume contains a few factual mistakes, such as Kenny’s assertion that Ireland gained its own Parliament in the eighteenth century when in fact, as Bartlett points out, Ireland had a “Parliament of undeniable medieval origins” (p. 61), even if that Parliament met infrequently and from 1494 until 1782 was subordinate to the English Privy Council. I have already offered my suggestions for a more helpful organization of chapters, and I would add that the book might have been improved with more comparisons of Ireland and the British empire to other European states and their empires. Canny, Ohlmeyer and Howe make the same suggestion in their respective contributions, and perhaps this will be the subject of a volume of essays in the not-too-distant future. As a collection of essays goes, this volume is tightly focused without being repetitive. All the contributors, and Kenny in particular, are to be congratulated on a book that provides an excellent introduction to, summary of, and (if we are prepared to accept compromise and synthesis) even a road map beyond, what has been, and is likely to remain a topic of much debate.

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