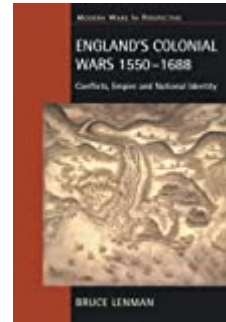


Bruce Lenman. *England's Colonial Wars 1550-1688: Conflicts, Empire and National Identity.* Modern Wars in Perspective Series. Harlow and New York: Longman, 2001. x + 310 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-06296-2.



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England's First Colonial Wars

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What is a “colonial” war? Lenman defines it as imposing control on “radically alien” societies, either on the territorial margins of the colonising state, or, further afield, to secure a territorial presence or trading supremacy. These episodes of naval, amphibious and land-based colonial war also involved rival European powers. Tudor privateering attacks on Spanish shipping; Anglo-Dutch naval conflicts in the Indian Ocean; genocidal “feed fights” (p. 233) launched by American colonists against the Powhatan on the Chesapeake; later resistance by “King Philip” in New England, by now (1675-76) waging gunpowder warfare; all fall within this colonial rubric. Localised and, at times, general warfare in Ireland, occupying most of the latter half of the sixteenth-century (and about half of the book) does not, at least without qualification and explanation.

Were the Irish, in fact, “radically alien”? Steven Ellis has argued that conditions in the late medieval English lordship in Ireland, encompassing about a third of the island but most of its population and agricultural wealth, approximated those of an English marchland like

the Welsh borders.[1] Lenman incorporates this perspective by emphasizing the internal frontier between Irish Gaeldom and the English lordship. This, I think, predisposes him to overstate the cultural and political impermeability of that frontier and to draw too sharp a contrast with the Scottish Gaels who were not, he claims, regarded as alien by other members of a culturally plural kingdom. A short review of this nature does not allow this point to be developed, but the “English” of the lordship in Ireland were (apart from the towns and some small rural districts such as Fingal and the baronies of Bargy and Forth) a fairly thin land-owning crust superimposed on a Gaelic-speaking population of native Irish descent. In any event, much of the colonial warfare was waged within the English lordship against the “English” earldoms of Kildare and Desmond.

Despite all these reservations, I think Lenman is right to include Ireland within an Atlantic or colonial framework. For one thing, Ireland and (Jane Ohlmeyer argues[2]) Scotland served as “laboratories” of Empire where the likes of Walter Raleigh or Humphrey Gilbert applied assumptions of barbarism, confirmed by their

Irish experiences, to the native inhabitants of the “New World.” The question of Ireland’s subjection to a Tudor “conquest or a reformation”[3] and the precise sequence and relative importance of these competing persuasive and coercive strategies has absorbed Irish historiography. Yet, Lenman rightly emphasizes the comparable role of “political rapists hoping to leap from something to nothing by a sudden act of possessive violence” (p. 122) in fomenting colonial conflict, both in Ireland (regardless of whatever was the current officially sanctioned strategy) and in the Atlantic world.[4]

“Internal” Colonialism in Ireland hindered as well as stimulated British colonial ventures in North America by, for example, absorbing (lowland) Scots settlement and finance.[5] In all these respects Ireland belonged to the Atlantic colonial world. That it suddenly ceased to do so after the final conquest of Ireland and the Plantation of Ulster might be implied by Lenman’s sudden shift of focus from Ireland after c. 1610. In fact plantation, or land confiscation from natives, was extended during the next thirty years. Fear of this colonialist agenda was at least as important a cause of the 1641 rising as the three-kingdom crisis of the late 1630s.[6] The genocidal fantasies of the Cromwellian Richard Lawrence’s *Great Case of Transplantation in Ireland Discussed* (1655) are worthy of Edmund Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596).[7] These remarks are a comment on the difficulty in negotiating multiple contexts rather than criticism of Lenman who, no doubt, faced the problem of keeping his work within manageable parameters.

Lenman is at pains to debunk any notion that there emerged a coherent ideology of “Empire” or that this was an important component of English identity. He repeatedly emphasizes that works like Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* (1589), Raleigh’s *The Discoverie of Guiana* (1596), or Davies’ *Discoverie of the True Causes Why Ireland Was Never Entirely Subdued* (1612) were simply “guides to the author’s ambition and self-promotion” (p. 163). The English, he demonstrates, were not enthusiasts for Empire. The Stuarts relentlessly subordinated colonial enterprise, especially in Asia, to the exigencies of European diplomacy, successively appeasing the Spanish/Portuguese—by accepting their exclusionary claims in the Americas—(pp. 174-5), the Dutch and, later, the French.

Influential members of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) were worried about the military and naval costs of enforcing high profits on small volumes in monopolistically controlled markets, although mercantilist and anglophobic hard-liners like Jan Pieterzoon Coen

were adamant that “we cannot carry on war without trade or trade without war” (p. 189). News of the judicial murder of ten East India Company (EIC) factors trading under the protection of a Dutch fort (some fifteen months after the event) caused outrage in England.[8] However, James I wanted Dutch support against Spain and, consequently, the VOC fleet was allowed to sail unmolested through the English Channel. Charles I was even worse; his promise was “singularly worthless” (p. 193). Incidentally, most of the time such strongly phrased judgements are refreshingly direct but, just occasionally, they are irritatingly simplistic. For example, there was considerably more to James II’s preference for Catholicism than the supposed fact that it “taught subjects they were dammed if they resisted their kings” (p. 199). Stuart assertiveness towards the Dutch in Asia was not, Lenman argues convincingly, driven by concern for the EIC but by Stuart dislike for the Dutch. The fateful marriage alliance of William of Orange and Mary Stuart was driven by short-term opportunism within the context of unremitting Stuart hostility to the Dutch.

This is emphatically “new” military history; the author is concerned with the political and ideological context of episodes of colonial warfare rather than specific clashes or, indeed, weaponry and tactics. While this conforms to the general remit of the “Wars in Perspective” series, other titles in this series, such as John A. Lynn’s *Wars of Louis XIV: 1667-1714* (Longman, 1999), strike what seems (to this unreconstructed military historian) to be a better balance between so-called “new” and “old.” When Lenman does touch on the latter, as for example, on the difficulty of stopping the shallow-draught west Highland galleys ferrying mercenaries between Scotland and Ireland (p. 114) or his positive revaluation of the Earl of Essex’s 1599 campaign in Ireland (p. 134) his observations are perceptive. An example of his reticence concerns the 1686-89 Bengal War when the Moghuls defeated the British East India Company in battle, preventing the company from seizing a port. Here, Lenman correctly observes in passing that Europeans did not yet enjoy a “decisive edge” (p. 209) on land over Asian powers, but he does not develop this important point adequately. Robert Clive, with a smaller number of European troops and European trained sepoys was able to smash a Moghul army ten times larger than his at Plassey (1757).[9] How did the relative military performance of British and Moghuls diverge so sharply over the intervening seventy years?

To conclude, Lenman presents a vigorously argued case against the existence of a coherent imperial ideology

as a component of English identity emphasizing, instead, contingency and the “erratic impact of war” (p. 287).

Notes

[1]. Steven G. Ellis, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors 1447-1603* (Longman, 1998).

[2]. Jane H. Ohlmeyer, “Colonization within Britain and Ireland,” in *The Origins of Empire; British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth-Century*, ed. Nicholas Canny, *Oxford History of the British Empire*, I, 146.

[3]. The phrase is Thomas Cromwell’s, cited in Ellis, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors*, 145.

[4]. Thomas Smith, in advertising his proposed plantation of the Ards Peninsula in east Ulster complained of “our law, which giveth all to the elder brother”; how many of these adventurers belonged to the “younger son” residuum of discontent?

[5]. Nicholas Canny, “The Origins of Empire,” in *The Origins of Empire*, 12-5.

[6]. Nicholas Canny, “The Attempted Anglicisation of Ireland in the Seventeenth-Century: An Exemplar of British History,” in *The Political World of Thomas Wentworth Earl of Strafford, 1621-1641*, ed. J.F. Merritt (Cam-

bridge, 1996), 173.

[7]. I can not claim to be competent to judge Lenman’s startlingly revisionist thesis that Spenser was not, in fact, the author. Others have noted the divergence of views with the *Faerie Queen* without necessarily reaching this conclusion. See, for example, Anne Fogarty, “The Colonisation of Language,” in *Spenser in Ireland*, ed. Patricia Coughlan (Cork, 1989).

[8]. Angus Calder, *Revolutionary Empire: The Rise of the English-Speaking Empires from the Fifteenth-century to the 1780s* (Pimlico, 1998), 111. This delay is a reminder of the extent to which events in Asia were out of phase with European “real-time” and the consequent difficulty of any closely centralized control of Asian operations.

[9]. Geoffrey Parker, *Military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500-1800: The Military Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988), 135.

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