



**Patricia Palmer.** *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland: English Renaissance Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xii + 254 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-79318-6.

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## Historicism, History, and the Politics of Language in Early Modern Ireland

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Patricia Palmer's first book, derives from a University of Oxford dissertation, and it is to the author's credit that it is marred neither by residual traces of a dissertation nor the tentativeness that one might expect of a first major statement in print. Rather, we have a book, which is assured, broad-ranging, un-apologetically ambitious, and robustly combative. The subject is historical while the author is a textual critic, and the resulting outcome possesses the strengths and weaknesses of its genre: a historical undertaking within the new-historicist mode in literary criticism.

The main title, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland*, describes admirably the principal subject of the book which seeks to isolate the attitude which the advocates of the Elizabethan Conquest (or should it be Re-Conquest?) of Ireland adopted towards the Irish language, the role which they saw for the English language in their civilizing mission, and the identity conflicts which resulted from the eventual emergence of two rival vernaculars in a confined space. In the course of doing so, Palmer rekindles the unresolved debate of what motivated the advocates of an Elizabethan conquest of Ireland; she challenges the recent effort by David Armitage to counter the view that English literature paved the way for imperial expansion even in Elizabethan times; and she contends that the so-called "death of the Irish language"—always an emotive subject for Irish

nationalists—was the logical outcome of policies pursued in the sixteenth century more than the consequence of educational and demographic developments of the nineteenth century. Then, to lend substance to her arguments, she looks to the role of language in the Spanish conquest of the New World and develops a comparison between the attempted Hispanicization of New Spain and the strategies adopted to attain the Anglicization of Ireland (and also some parts of the New World) during the sixteenth century.

This summary, which hardly does justice to the scope of this book, will convey some sense of its ambition and importance as well as the variety of readers in history, literature, and linguistics who will derive pleasure, information, stimulation, and perhaps aggravation, from the challenge of *Language and Conquest*. While the book amazes in its scope, the sources which Palmer has used are also more extensive than one would expect the author of a first book to have mastered. She has worked her way through all relevant Calendars of State Papers from the reign of King Henry VIII to the close of that of Queen Elizabeth; she has consulted all English, and some Continental European, pamphlets of the sixteenth century that shed light on prevailing theories on the origin and function of languages; she speaks authoritatively of printed Irish language sources of the sixteenth century; and she is conversant with much historical literature on early modern Ireland. Palmer also asks questions of her sources which derive from her reading of the theories both of post-colonial and feminist critics who publish

in English, and of French and Spanish language critics and intellectuals who have expounded on the Conquest of New Spain.

The obvious benefit of Palmer's training and method is that she can situate her subject in a far wider context than would be expected of, or indeed possible for, most historians when they publish a first book. Palmer is also more adept than most initiates to history publishing at interrogating her sources. She, for example, treats every document, pamphlet, and literary composition that seems relevant to her purposes as an individual text which not only conveys a message from the author to its intended audience, but which also frequently incorporates reported dialogues, as, for example, those between English officials and Irish lords. This particular consideration brings Palmer to the obvious conclusion, which had not been commented upon by any historian, that conversations of this kind could usually only have taken place with the aid of an interpreter. Deriving from this—in one of the inspired passages in the book—Palmer discusses the identity and role of interpreters in sixteenth-century Ireland. Such consideration, as also Palmer's treatment of the response of Gaelic *literati* to the fate of the language and the world which they cherished, is enabled by her facility with Irish language texts; a skill that most historians of early modern Ireland neither possess nor consider necessary to their task.

These strengths of Palmer and the methods that she, like most critics, have been trained to espouse are partly offset by a general reliance on printed, and even edited, sources, where an emerging historian, working on a smaller canvas, would be expected to trace sources back to their manuscript origins whenever these are extant. Thus where the historian would always be expected to add to the existing corpus of information Patricia Palmer, as a critic, seems satisfied to advance understanding by reading new meanings into generally well-known texts. This, as I have indicated, she sometimes does successfully and even dramatically. However the question remains, if the comparisons she draws are always valid and if the meanings she reads into, and from, her chosen texts are always correct.

The purpose of comparison for Palmer is to create a context within which she can elucidate her chosen texts, and the context which she chooses is that of the Spanish *conquistadores* in the New World, and, to a lesser degree, that of some English adventurers in North America, especially where these happen to be people who had been previously engaged in Ireland. This, for her, is a

valid point of departure because she presumes that in all three instances (New Spain, North America, and Ireland) the would-be conquerors were confronting a people whose language they neither knew nor respected, and which, she contends, they hoped ultimately to obliterate to make way for the exclusive use of either Spanish or English in their respective domains. Patricia Palmer has been brought to this conviction by the heart-wrenching arguments of J.M.G. Le Clezio, Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz each of whom she cites as alluding to the silence that was effected everywhere the Spaniards came to dominate in the New World, as not only multitudes of Native Americans but the spirit of those of them who survived, succumbed to European disease and Spanish oppression. The relevance of all this for Ireland seems to have been inspired for Palmer by the contention of Stephen Greenblatt that if the overseas engagement of the Elizabethans has any claim to be described as a mission this can be justified only by their attempts at the "propagation of English speech" (cited p. 125) rather than their efforts to spread Protestant Christianity.

While the arguments of all such authors may be both compelling and persuasive it is not axiomatic that the circumstances they describe were in many, or any, ways applicable to Irish conditions of the sixteenth century, and I see the particular weakness of this book to be its general failure to come to grips with the circumstances under which the advocates of an Elizabethan conquest of Ireland functioned. For that reason I will, for the remainder of this review, identify some of the false assumptions made by Patricia Palmer so that we can better distinguish what in this book advances historical understanding from that which will be of interest only to polemicists.

To my mind, Palmer's first false assumption concerns the inevitability of an Elizabethan conquest of Ireland. Historians, as she well understands, are not agreed on when a conquest seemed unavoidable and few today would suggest a date earlier than 1579 or even 1599. Even those who are satisfied that a conquest was underway at a given moment in time, concede that it was only a minority within the English community in Ireland (and fewer still among the English community at large) who countenanced the strong measures necessary to effect a conquest. It seems rash, therefore, to presume that the voices of the few in Ireland who advanced arguments in favor of a conquest can be taken as representative of all English opinion, and it seems altogether amiss to date such sentiment back to parliamentary legislation of 1537 which dictated a strategy for the promotion of religious reform in Ireland. Moreover as I have argued in *Mak-*

*ing Ireland British, 1580-1650* (Oxford University Press: 2001)—a book which appeared when *Language and Conquest* was already in press [and will be reviewed on H-Albion this week, ed.]—most of the English who served in Elizabethan Ireland prior to the arrival of the second earl of Essex in 1599 were long-serving soldiers who had become integrated into Irish society either to the point where their wives or mistresses were Irish or where they served in bands where Irish-born, Irish-speaking, people constituted a majority. The ensuing reality that most English people in Ireland at any date previous to 1599 possessed a rudimentary knowledge of spoken Irish is tacitly acknowledged by Palmer, first, when she mentions that between one half and one third of Lord Mountjoy's men (who brought the conquest to a conclusion) were Irish, and, second, when she identifies captains with such English names as Duke and Willis acting as interpreters for their superiors who had recently arrived in Ireland from England. On the other hand, Palmer takes insufficient account of what Steven Ellis has had to say on the survival of spoken English among people of Anglo-Norman descent in the provinces to the close of the Middle Ages, and she takes even less account of the role of educated English-speaking leaders from within the Old English Pale community in Ireland as intermediaries between the officers of the state and Gaelic lords in the provinces. To say therefore that "few newcomers acquired English" (p. 44) is entirely false and ignores the linguistic fluidity which obtained in Ireland, not only with English people becoming conversant in Irish when it suited their purpose but with some people of Gaelic descent seeking to pass themselves, chameleon-like, as English.

The valuable contribution of Patricia Palmer on the role and identity of interpreters in Ireland (they might be English captains, or Irish captains in crown service, or Old English people of elevated or lowly status, or people of Gaelic ancestry who had been ordained to the Protestant ministry) indicates the sharp contrast that existed between Ireland and those parts of North America where English people had become involved. There, during the early years, interpreters were either Native Americans who had been brought (some forcefully, others consensually) to England so they might learn sufficient English to become interpreters on their return to America, or they were English boys who were sent to live among Native Americans as a means of acquiring a knowledge of native languages which would equip them to bridge the linguistic gap. In Ireland no such special cohort of intermediaries had to be created because there was a ready supply of bilingual people to hand there whenever interpreting

or translating was required.

What then, we might ask, of the negative portrayal of the Irish language that does feature in the tracts of those advocating a policy of conquest for Ireland from which Patricia Palmer quotes liberally? My explanation is that the use of the Irish language by English speakers came to be seen as a symbol of the degeneration which threatened all from England and Wales who served in Ireland, including some of gentle birth who had become landowners or army captains. Moreover those authors who sought to anathematize the Irish language, as they did Gaelic customs, were well aware of the denigration of both that had been a commonplace within the English-speaking community of the Irish Pale during the later middle ages. What they had to say in their texts were therefore, in many instances, no more than updatings of what authors from the Pale had averred, and legislated upon, in earlier times. Another explanation for the denigration of the Irish language was that as the English advocates of conquest learned more about Irish society they came to appreciate that the learned classes, and most notably the poetic orders, were potent intellectual opponents; a fact that was confirmed by translations of Irish verses commissioned by both Edmund Spenser and Richard Bingham. But if the advocates of conquest did want to eradicate their learned opponents within the Gaelic community, and if they stated their desire that the Irish language should give way to English, none of them believed that this would happen in the short or medium terms. What they worked towards was a situation where the learned orders would be cut off and Irish would become a language of uneducated rural dwellers. Under such circumstances, officials would be willing to countenance its use only to the extent that evidence might be presented in that language at court where it might be translated (and perhaps interpreted) into English for the benefit of judge and jury. This, technically, did happen, but, Irish also endured as a vehicle of political and religious discourse as is confirmed by Palmer's final gripping chapter on the "Clamorous Silence" which treats principally of the achievement of continentally-educated priests and brothers in utilizing the language for novel purposes.

To conclude, I consider that Dr. Palmer, like most historicist critics, pushes her argument well ahead of the evidence that might sustain it. However she raises far more questions than a historian in the early stages of a career would be likely to engage with, largely because a historical training reconciles its initiates to advance knowledge incrementally rather than in one fell swoop. The

other advantage that Palmer has over most historians of early modern Ireland is her deep understanding of languages other than English, and particularly, in having a sufficient command of Irish to work on source material in that language. It is quite clear that if historians want the interpretation of Ireland's past to remain within their province they too must equip themselves with language and analytic skills to match those of the versatile Patricia Palmer. If they fail to do so empirical evidence will cease to be the touchstone of truth about the past, and histori-

ans will see their "facts" being juxtaposed and annealed by those who have the art to render them into verisimilitude and credibility.

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