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Nicholas Canny. *Making Ireland British, 1580-1650.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. xiv + 633 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820091-8.



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Nicholas Canny hints at the importance of this book within work on Irish history in recent decades, when he notes that the book “has been so long in the making” (p. vii). It is a culmination, a summation, and a justification of a career which, again by Canny’s own admission, has been marked by controversy. He claims to be unaware of the reason for his fame, but speculates that it has come about because he is uncategorizable. Rather than swim with the fishes in a pool stocked with like-minded historians of a particular school, he chooses instead the solitary life. He is a scholar whose dialogue is with his sources.

Nevertheless, the sources which Canny chooses to prioritize, like those of any other historian, describe the waters the scholar chooses to explore. His chronology underpins a conscious process of “making Ireland British.” The key, transformative period began with the new settlers of the Munster plantation of the 1580s and was already reaching its conclusion when conqueror Cromwell arrived in August 1649. “Making Ireland British” was therefore, a process whereby political allegiance was shaped by settlement and cultural assumption, rather than by conquest and military imposition. By the time that the English parliamentary army came to Ireland, to mop up the unrest that had been inflamed by the rebellion of the winter of 1641, Ireland, it is implied, was already “British.”

This emphasis on a process of acculturation explains Canny’s willingness to trawl widely, refusing to dismiss as ahistorical material from any genre. Canny’s key historical witness, therefore, to the attitudes which English commentators brought to Ireland in the late sixteenth century, is the courtier, politician, poet, and moral philosopher, Edmund Spenser. Both the *View of the Present State of Ireland* and *The Faerie Queene* are examined for what they can tell the historian about the “British” presence in Ireland. The civil servants, soldiers and minor officials who attempted to manage Ireland are seen in Spenser’s mould.

This approach leads us to a number of interesting speculations about Canny’s view of Irish history. He chose not to present a narrative of all of the attempts at plantation, starting with that of Leix/Offaly. Neither does he treat the Connacht plantation in the same way as those of Munster and Ulster, choosing rather to subsume plantation within a wider context of Wentworth’s policy. Is the implication, therefore, that unlike, for example, Karl Bottigheimer, Canny does not see plantation as the vehicle by which Anglicization was driven through Ireland?

Secondly, Canny’s view does not imply a cumulative process of Anglicization which was, ironically, crowned by Cromwell’s military presence or by the subsequent

settlement that bears his name. What, then, was the purpose of the Cromwellian presence in Ireland? Was it a means to enforce a policy many had already assumed to be implemented? Was it a recognition that cultural change had been so unsuccessful that only its forcible execution by the musket would do? Was it really a battle between royalists and their opponents that owed more to the English crisis but which was played out on Irish soil? Was it the means to accelerate and finish the plantation, transplantation and transportation of bodies? For Canny, the Cromwellian settlement was a means to impose Anglicization because the survival of Irish culture and religion seemed to show the failure of past policies. This meant the transplantation of English and Scottish settlers who would inherently reject Irishness because their Protestantism was unshakeable. It meant the marginalization of the Old English, whose loyalty to Britishness was compromised by their stubborn (for which read “wilful”) refusal to reject Rome. It meant the transplantation of British communities, the representatives of which would act as exemplars, mentors, administrators and enforcers of a new culture onto the majority of the Irish people.

Edmund Spenser provided the model for what should be done in times of crisis: that an Irish man should “in short time learn quite to forget his Irish nation” (p. 577). Here lies the crux of Canny’s view of Irish history, its controversy, and the reason for its poor fit into traditional historical schools. Spenser provides the theoretical ideal against which the plantation schemes of Munster and Ulster and the policy of Thomas Wentworth should

be measured. Hence there are sections on the first two of these which explore the theory of plantation and then the practice. Spenser’s vision is presented as a successful reality by 1640. A new breed of lord—the Boyles, the Cootes, and the Percevals—governed on behalf of a centralized authority, having jurisdiction over a wealth of minor officials. Trade and economic development was organised to benefit London markets as part of an interdependent British network.

Some historians of Ireland would not agree that Spenser’s view of Ireland was typical. Here, it is presupposed, and indeed, stated explicitly, that there was a policy: systematic, continuous, and part of a “grand ambition.” By starting with Spenser, a man who directed the chief virtues of poetry and history towards a vision, this narrative is given force, life, and a personification. The alternative account is that English/British political influence and physical presence in Ireland was a series of *ad hoc* responses to the latest crisis of its authority. The end result may well have been the same, but achieved by a series of blunders and reverses: typical British incompetence, not typical British imperialism. Spenser is Canny’s weapon in a plan to scotch this view. Placing so much responsibility onto one pair of shoulders is a risky strategy, but one which lends force to Canny’s narrative and provides an accessible route into the controversial complexities of contemporary Irish historiography. Structuring a history of Ireland in this way may well have lost some of the subtleties of the argument, but Canny is a man with a mission which lends itself to a different craft.

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