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Britain, Ireland, and Continental Europe in the Eighteenth Century: Similarities, Connections, Identities

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The rise of the Atlantic world as a framework for understanding early modern and 18th-century Britain has been one of the most significant historiographical developments of the last 25 years. Together with the concurrent and linked re-emergence of imperial history it has helped reshape perceptions of Britain and Ireland in the 18th century, leading scholars to rethink older exceptionalist viewpoints and to revisit old questions in new and innovative ways. Stephen Conway, in his studies of the impact on British and Irish society of first the American War, and then the mid century wars, has made important contributions to discussions about the place of these countries in the Atlantic world. His new book, however, seeks to demonstrate that the Atlantic is not the only context within which Britain and Ireland should be located but that they should be seen also as part of Europe and integral parts at that. He argues not only that Britain and Ireland were closely linked to the continent, but also, importantly, that contemporaries saw themselves as Europeans.

Conway is not alone in attempting to reassess Britain?s relationship with the continent, and he acknowledges other important recent contributions by Tony Claydon, Brendan Simms, and Jeremy Black among others. His approach is, however, different to theirs both in terms of geographical range and of scope. While their focus was on England (in Claydon?s case) or Britain (Simms and Black), Conway brings Ireland fully into

his story. Here he builds on recent Irish scholarship which has sought to integrate the Irish experience into a wider European narrative, best exemplified by Ian McBride in his recent survey text *Eighteenth Century Ireland: The Isle of Slaves* (1) and in the publications emanating out of the ?Irish in Europe? project based at NUI Maynooth. Claydon?s *Europe and the Making of England, 1660-1760* (2) emphasises the importance of religion as well as foreign policy, while a detailed consideration of the latter theme lies at the heart of Simms?s *Three Victories and a Defeat*.(3)

Black has also focused much of his attention on military and diplomatic connections though he has also written on the Grand Tour. Conway goes further again with his discussion of a variety of themes ranging from political economy to migration, to improvement as well as more traditional topics such as the Tour and military, maritime and diplomatic links between the British Isles and the European continent. The thematic structure of his book makes it easy to navigate, while also allowing the reader to gain a ?panoramic view? of Anglo-European connections (p. 2).

Conway begins his study in 1689 with the ?Glorious Revolution?, and his first chapter examines the constitutional legacy of the revolution showing how it could be seen both as proof of English/British exceptionalism as well as evidence for the interconnectedness between Britain, Ireland and the continent. Many contemporaries saw the revolution as proof of the resilience and superiority of the English constitution. This was a view that gained more and more currency as the century went on, reaching its zenith during the French Revolution when events across the channel seemed only to demonstrate the validity of such a reading of events 100 years previously. Conversely, however, as Conway shows, it was also possible to view the revolution in a ?less chauvinistic? manner, and see it as a European event, with far reaching consequences beyond the shores of Britain or Ireland. The perceived success of the revolution allowed contemporaries to compare and contrast other forms of constitutional government, and to hope for the further extension of their ?liberties? to other European states. As the century went on, continental legal and governmental ideas were emulated in Britain, while the French revolution, like the American one before it, forced some British and Irish subjects to question just how many ?liberties? they really enjoyed.

The 1688 revolution has long been recognised as marking a turning point in the history of British foreign policy. It marked the beginnings of a century of much more active British military involvement on the continent. First the Dutch, and then the Hanoverian, connection ensured that it was no longer possible for English/British ministers to maintain an isolationist position. The presence of the Jacobite court in exile and continuing fears of a French-backed Stuart invasion of Britain and Ireland further motivated official and popular interest in events on the continent. Fear of the French has long been regarded as a determining factor in the make-up of both British foreign policy and identity and Conway does not disagree with this reading. He does, however, suggest that British policy and appeals for public support of what were sometimes unpopular interventions were at least partly influenced by common ideas of a continental identity based on a shared sense of ?European liberties?. The sincerity of appeals to these shared ?liberties? or indeed to a common ?Protestant Interest? is difficult to gauge ? as he acknowledges ? but the fact they were made at all indicates there was an audience for such sentiments. Such sentiments, and indeed appeals, were only possible because of the increased knowledge of European affairs which permeated British and Irish society in this period. This is visible even in Irish Gaelic poetry, as the work of Eamonn O Ciardha and Vincent Morley has demonstrated, even if such sources suggest identification with Britain?s continental enemies rather than with her allies.

1688/9 did not just mean dramatic alterations in Britain?s constitution, government and foreign policies, but also in finance, even if historians no longer agree that the political revolution marked the start of the financial revolution. Whether it really was the beginning or not it certainly accelerated changes already visible during Charles II?s reign. The need to pay for King William?s wars was a vital contributory factor to the series of innovations that so fascinated and frightened contemporaries in the early decades of the century. The ?new finance? needed investors to make it work and Conway highlights the importance of foreign investors in British funds, but he also points to British and Irish investment in European markets showing that such investment was not just confined to such instances of the spectacular as John Law?s Mississippi scheme in 1719?20. Such capital flows across borders were important in the creation of a common European

financial system, something which it is clear contemporaries realised. Integrated capital markets were but one dimension of the economic links between the British Isles and the continent. More important in fostering connections were the ever-growing trading networks which continued to be of vital importance even during the golden era of Atlantic trade in the middle decades of the century. While there was undoubtedly an explosion in transatlantic trade it did not lead to decline in trade with the continent; instead both sectors grew. Indeed, as Conway shows, the period after the American War saw European trade achieve a new prominence, something which he argues led to calls for greater commercial ties between European states, ties which contemporaries like Jeremy Bentham and the Scottish political economist James Anderson felt were more important than political divisions. As a frustrated Bentham pointed out politics could be the enemy of trade and in this case political exigencies won out. Such calls for further economic integration then as now were not heeded.

The first three chapters of this book, as well as later chapters on British and Irish maritime and military connections with the continent, cover themes one might expect in a conventional book on the subject. One of the things that makes this book different, as suggested earlier, is the equal focus given to topics usually outside mainstream historiographies. Thus we get treatments of topics such as politeness, improvement, intellectual exchanges, and the Grand Tour as well as religion. These chapters not only integrate their themes into the broader narrative, but they also offer interesting insights drawn from the author?s very impressive archival diggings. The chapter on ?politeness? is especially wide-ranging, perhaps not surprisingly considering the slippery nature of its theme, including explorations of language proficiency, musical accomplishment, and gardening. Conway is keen to test not just how continental influences could be seen in Britain and Ireland, but also how contemporaries, at least within the upper ranks of society, reacted to these influences; did they, essentially, make them more European? He concludes that a European consciousness did develop, arguing that the common interpretation of the French Revolution as a threat to European culture demonstrated that an understanding of a shared European culture had permeated British and Irish elite society even at the same time as national and ?patriotic? identities were also on the rise.

Such fluid identities were the product of intellectual and cultural exchanges; two themes explored in some detail in the book. In his treatment of the Grand Tour, Conway takes it more seriously than many mainstream historians, while also being fully aware of the absurdities of it all. For instance he asks the pertinent but rarely asked question, how did local populations on the continent react to the arrival of what were often decadent and occasionally debauched young aristocratic young men from Britain and Ireland into their locale? He also stresses the importance of connections garnered by tourists and the sense of solidarity that tours could engender between ruling classes across Europe, once more returning to one his central arguments that we should avoid interpretations which neglect the possibility of multiple identities.

Such multiple identities were perhaps never more clearly demonstrated than in the persons of those Irish and Britons who earned a living abroad. These were, as Conway points out, employed in numerous different capacities which went beyond the obvious categories of soldier, sailor, priest, and merchant, although all of these were important. They were joined on the continent by economic migrants, by Irish and Scottish innkeepers (the originators of that modern fixture of so many European cities, the Irish bar?) as well as by the significant British medical diaspora, whose reach extended all the way to the Russian court. Analysing the mental worlds of these migrants is difficult, as Conway acknowledges, making it impossible to fully decipher their competing identities. Through the use of a small number of well documented examples, notably the Scottish merchant William Dalrymple, he is nevertheless able to posit suggestive conclusions about the conflicted loyalties and complicated mentalities of his case studies. Similarly he examines their counterparts ? those migrants who arrived in London and elsewhere in the British Isles ? noting the hostile reception they often received. Writing about Ireland, he observes that continental Protestants were often received warmly as a further bulwark in the defence of the ?Protestant interest?. What he neglects to mention is that many of the German Palatines who arrived in the early years of the century were less impressed with their new surroundings, and moved on quickly to the American colonies. They evidently did not immediately feel at home in Ireland.

The great achievement of this book is to highlight the manifold connections that existed between Britain, Ireland and the continent. These connections allowed for similarities to be emphasised at least as much as differences in contemporary debates and for at least some of the residents of Georgian Britain and Ireland to see themselves, at least some of the time, as Europeans. This argument is convincing and is also important in demonstrating the dangers of seeing Britain as inherently exceptional, as an island, or archipelago, off the west coast of the European continent. Conway?s achievement is to show that this was not so, and that contemporaries knew it too. His conclusions carry weight because of the mass of evidence, both primary and secondary, which is employed to back up his case. There are occasional selection biases with the periods and figures upon which he has worked before (the American War, the mid-century conflicts and Jeremy Bentham) all well represented. This is perhaps inevitable in a work of this ambition, as is his greater concentration on British examples. Despite this as an historian of Ireland I found much that was new in the Irish material that is cited. The inclusion of Irish and Scottish material adds much to this study not least because it shows that residents of these peripheries could be Europeans even before they were Britons.

Notes

1. Ian McBride, *Eighteenth Century Ireland: The Isle of Slaves* (Dublin, 2009).Back to (1)
2. Tony Claydon, *Europe and the Making of England, 1660?1760* (Cambridge, 2007).Back to (2)
3. Brendan Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat* (London, 2007).Back to (3)

The author is very grateful to Dr Walsh for a thorough and thoughtful review.

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