

England's Colonial Wars 1550-1688 / Britain's Colonial Wars 1688-1783

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Colonial wars are defined in these two vigorously iconoclastic books as 'episodes of violence associated with the establishment of . dominions (usually but not always overseas), trading supremacies on oceanic routes, and plantations or colonies; as well as the subsequent struggles between European states and their rival subjects for control of or access to such imperial prizes.' For the English and British case, wars in Ireland are most definitely included.

Professor Lenman is in no doubt of the importance of his subject, particularly for those peoples whose territory became an imperial prize, but he believes that much that has been written and continues to be written about colonial wars in his period is misdirected and misleading. He insists that while wars must 'be seen in their social and economic - as well as their political - contexts', they cannot be subsumed into a

process of expansion that relentlessly and inevitably carried Britain to world domination, while at the same time shaping the culture of its peoples. 'War and its contingencies remain a force in their own right'. The outcome of England's and Britain's colonial wars was never predictable and their consequences were rarely what contemporaries intended. Historians must therefore subject each war to close analysis rather than basing grand theories on unsustainable assumptions about colonial wars in general.

Two types of theorising, one economic the other cultural, incur Lenman's ire in particular. He sees only a limited role for extra-European trade and wealth extraction in Britain's pre-industrial economic development. 'For a generation, no more', that is roughly from 1748 to 1776, trade with the Americas, Ireland and Asia was the dynamic leading sector in overseas trade. Thereafter, 'the simple fact that there were 150,000,000 people in Europe and only 3,000,000 in the new United States helped return British manufactured exports to more traditional European markets.' Those who see colonial wars as a central part of a state policy of commercial expansion, largely driven by the needs of merchants, are given short shrift. The state had no such policy and merchants had little influence over such policies as it had. Immanuel Wallerstein's suggestion that the gains made by Britain in the peace of 1763 represented the 'victory of certain sections of the world bourgeoisie, who were rooted in England, with the aid of the British state' is briskly consigned to 'historiography's rubbish bin'. They reflected a fortuitous military and naval triumph that was soon to be reversed. In another passage arguments about the importance of 'the primary extraction of surplus' receive similar treatment. They can only be sustained 'by a selective use of those parts of the evidence which happen to fit the model'.

At that point Lenman couples 'post-mortem broad brush Marxism' with his other *bete noir*, that is with arguments that an English or British sense of their identity and of their culture were significantly influenced by colonial encounters that provided the 'other', be it Celt or Chinese, against which they could be defined. In Lenman's view, 'colonial peripheries' and their peoples 'were of very little contemporary interest indeed to the core English population even if that be redefined as a literate elite'. Moreover, those who did take an interest in such 'peripheral' peoples, be they native Americans or Irish, usually recognised both their diversity and the ways in which they were comparable to themselves. English and Scots accepted that there were 'many shifting identities in Ireland. The tendency of 'American historians in particular' to see Anglo-Irish relations as a ' "four hundred years war", at times of ' "genocidal magnitude" ' merely gives 'moral cohesion to the fractured vision created by their own work'. The 'whole assumption that official British culture in the period 1688-1783 was stamped by a particularly imperialistic outlook is itself very dubious'.

Not content with eliminating whole species of scholars, Lenman conducts a cull of certain specific contemporary sacred cows with the zeal of a vet from the former Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food confronting a foot-and-mouth epidemic. The 'brilliant synthesis' of John Brewer's *Sinews of Power* has only limited application to Britain's involvements overseas. Britain for most of the period was by no means an 'imperial state' as is implied by 'an admirable collection of essays based on a Princeton seminar', edited by Lawrence Stone and entitled *An Imperial State at War*. The Elizabethan adventurers, such as Raleigh and Gilbert have been taken 'far more seriously by posterity than they deserve'. Seventeenth-century English did not see affinities between Gaelic Irish and North American Indians. Those who denounce Edmund Spenser's supposed views on the Irish are obsessed 'with their own politics and the projection of those politics into the past'. Britain's rulers did not see Ireland in clearly imperial terms until the later eighteenth century. 'The whole concept of an evolving British identity based on imperial trade, imperial swagger and Protestantism, growing and evolving between 1739 and 1748 is sheer *post facto* constructionism by historians.' Protestantism no doubt contributed to a sense of British identity, but 'Protestants differed and belonged to three kingdoms and four nations'. 'To argue that the American Revolution was in some sense a religious war is just not convincing.'

How does Lenman restock the landscape over which he has strewn so many corpses? In the place of those arguments that he has demolished he offers two of his own of great interest. In the first place, he insists on the British state's limited capacity to wage war overseas until the very end of the eighteenth century and moreover on its very limited interest in doing so. As a consequence, the two hundred and fifty years or so with which his books deal are as much a record of checks and failures as of British successes. Britain could

not dominate the world outside Europe until the era of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. A triumphalist interpretation of a relentless rise of Britain to worldwide greatness is therefore entirely misplaced.

Elizabeth had no 'programme' for the conquest of Ireland before the 1590s and in any case she was 'probably too mean to make the necessary resources available for such a policy, even if she had them in the first place'. Her policies were 'an appalling failure rooted in ignorance and folly'. The 'English nation' conspicuously failed to become 'an Atlantic imperial people' in the wars of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. The colonies would not combine for their own defence and left it to metropolitan Britain reluctantly to shoulder more and more of the burden. In the War of the Austrian Succession the British were beaten off by the Spanish in the Caribbean, thrashed on the continent by the French and humiliated at home by the Jacobites. The Seven Years War brought great victories, but it left the British monarchy 'grossly over-extended' and harassed by 'often incompatible and demands, ambitions and points of view'. In particular, the war had unleashed an expansive imperialism in the thirteen colonies. 'It was becoming clear that settler and metropolitan versions of imperialism in North America were so incompatible that only force could move the argument out of impasse.' Force was indeed to be used and Britain was to lose the thirteen colonies. Such scepticism is very salutary.

Lenman breaks many lances against current theories about British identities, but he is deeply interested in the problem and has challenging arguments to propound. Again, he is warily sceptical. He does not believe that colonial wars consolidated either an English or a British identity. They had precisely the opposite effect. They led to two great 'fracturings of the Englishry' and did not create much in the way of Britishness to compensate.

The alienation of the Old English of Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the revolt of the English in North America in the later eighteenth century constituted the fracturings of the English. Lenman explains how the future Jesuit Edmund Campion identified in 1571 with 'our English in Ireland', that is with the Catholic Old English of Ireland, and hoped 'to strengthen English culture in Ireland'. His hopes were to be frustrated by the Elizabethan government, which unleashed waves of ruthless adventurers on Ireland. These New English rationalised their expropriations in the name of Protestantism and sought to turn the Old English into rebels. An alliance between the Gaels and the Old English in the name of a common 'Irishness' based on religion had no deep historic roots. It was the achievement of English policy from the later sixteenth century. In the 1640s and 1650s the Old English did indeed lead a 'Catholic proto-nationalist alliance'. Defeated, they finally merged into a 'Catholic nationalist community'. The New English were the victors, but the British state showed little inclination to bind them into a national community. They were to take up 'a principled hostility to the domination of the composite monarchy by London' as a consequence.

For all the waves of new immigrants during the eighteenth century, the elites in the thirteen colonies of North America were essentially English in outlook. These communities had never been ruled effectively from London and Lenman believes that 'the substance of independence . was probably inevitable by 1760'. The Americans had already developed 'a frightening appetite for further territorial aggrandisement', which exacerbated problems of rule. The 'ideological and tactical inflexibility of the Westminster system', however, ensured that independence came when it did and that it would constitute full sovereignty wrung from Britain by war. Until it was far too late, the British government clung to a 'frequently reiterated political theology which reserved for it a mystical seamless sovereignty'. As in their dealings with the Old English of Ireland, a narrowly based regime in London had pursued narrowly conceived objectives in its American policy and thus the English underwent 'the second great schism in their corporate identity' brought about by colonial war. This did, however, clear the way for the English to embrace Britishness with the Scots. That concept, in Lenman's view, only began to have real force in the late eighteenth century. By then the Scots were willing to 'add Britishness to their multiple identities, something most American English colonists never really did.

It is hard to imagine any reader of these books who will not find his or her views challenged by Lenman's robust and splendidly unpredictable views. For instance, his dislike of the ignorance and arrogance, particularly about notions of sovereignty, of the London political elite at any time is well known to *aficionados*

of Lenman's work. It is a revelation to discover how much he dislikes the founding fathers of the American Republic, who 'devised a self-righteous civic religion' as their ideology and 'in the name of liberty went in for ruthless populist suppression of dissenting voices'.

Readers must perhaps be prepared for other challenges. The reasons for the scale on which some episodes are treated by comparison with others are not always obvious. Why, for instance, is there so little on the War of the American Revolution outside North America? Reading these books is rather like listening to Bruce Lenman in person in full flow as a raconteur or in making contributions to conference discussions. An extraordinarily quick and fertile mind is drawing on a vast stock of erudition. As Boswell said of Burke, he can foam like Niagara. The less nimble witted may feel that they are going over the falls in a barrel and may have real difficulties in teasing out the structure of the argument or in recognising the force of some of the allusions. They should persevere.

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[3]

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