Ireland in the Virginian Sea: Colonialism in the British Atlantic

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Author: Audrey Horning
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With this book on Ireland, the Chesapeake, and the beginnings of the Anglo-Atlantic world, Horning wades into two long-running debates about the nature of early English colonialism. The first is the question of where Ireland fits into the expansion projects set in motion in the 16th century. As early as the 19th century, historians such as George Hill reflected on Ireland’s status as a colony and its relationship to England’s other early colonial enterprises. David Beers Quinn compared the attitude of English colonizers towards the Gaelic Irish and the Native Americans. More recently, Nicholas Canny took up the topic in a series of books and articles concentrating on the intellectual worlds and ambitions of leading English colonizers, developing the idea that the opinion held by these men about the native Irish strongly influenced their behaviour towards the native Americans. The second major issue pursued by Horning is the question of the relationship between natives and ‘on the ground’ settlers. As Horning herself notes, there are multiple ways of viewing such colonial entanglements, principally ‘acculturation, maintenance of tradition, and hybridity/creolization’ (p. 10). Plumping for the hybridity model, Horning sets herself apart from previous historians interested in Ireland’s place in the early Atlantic world by arguing for a complex entanglement between English and Irish, as well as English and Indians. This was an entanglement that involved violence and resistance but was not completely defined by it. Horning’s position within these lengthy, and often politically-charged, debates is laid out in her introductory chapter, in which she emphasizes the unpredictable and ever-changing nature of encounter in Ireland and Virginia. Importantly, however, any meaningful similarities between these two colonies were ultimately limited by the ‘long-standing continental cultural and religious connections’ (p. 16) that made Ireland an unsuitable model for the English colonization of the relatively new world of North America.

Much of the evidence for Horning’s argument is archaeological, and it is her expertise as an historical archaeologist that allows her to shed new light on these long-standing debates about Ireland, colonization, and England’s early Atlantic world. Throughout the book, she combines detailed analysis of material and written evidence in both Virginia and the Irish plantations to examine more precisely the relationship between the two colonizing projects. Fully embracing a comparative approach and, at the same time, meditating on the nature of the British Atlantic world at the earliest stages of the enterprise, Horning offers a highly nuanced reading of the nature of the connections that characterized the early English Atlantic.

Looking at the Ulster and the Munster plantations, and touching on the failed English settlement at Roanoke, Horning starts her story in the 16th century with the initial quest to create a colonial Ireland. The author stresses how, throughout these early experiences, identities were extremely malleable and rarely fixed. Although English intellectuals and military men like Smith, Essex, and Lane were equipped with an ideology of settlement, its application was fully subject to the decisions of the native population, whose actions would ensure that expediency and pragmatism won the day. Thus, while it was indisputable that by the end of the 16th century the Irish had become constructed as the other, and that a ‘discourse of inferiority’ (p. 17) informed most English activities in Ireland, there were still many ways in which the status of Ireland as a colony was contested. In Ulster, the cultural influence of Scots-Irish settlers on the landscape shaped settlement patterns at the same time as English colonizers sought to stamp their presence on it. In Munster, the English viewed the plantation as a ‘res nullius’ (p. 85) but the reality of a long-settled society was critical. As a people with centuries of sustained contact with other peoples behind them, the Irish response to the English onslaught was far from uniform. Such variety is particularly visible in the Irish reactions to the arrival of the defeated Spanish Armada on their shores, and Horning very effectively charts how some people welcomed it as the English enemy, some maintained neutrality, and still others sought to drive the Spaniards away.

Shifting her focus ‘across the Virginian sea’, Horning’s second chapter concentrates on the earliest moments of contact between indigenous Americans and European visitors. Her emphasis again is complexity and her ambition is to document the variable nature of the early entanglements between natives and Europeans. Horning falls in with those who view the history of early contact in America not as one of sudden shocks, but as a succession of episodic interactions taking place for the most part on the terms of the continent’s native peoples. Early French expeditions to Parris Island (in present-day South Carolina) failed because natives did not permit the visitors to stay. On the other hand, the density of Indian objects within the
Jamestown fort suggests a strong native presence and thus a willingness on the part of the Indians to allow
the newcomers to proceed with their project. In between these two incursions native Americans sporadically
encountered Europeans, either embracing or rejecting what they offered on their own terms. Thus, one major
contrast between Ireland and America at this stage in the colonization process lay in the ability of native
Americans to dictate the terms of interaction with the English much more than the native Irish sought to. The
second significant difference between the two projects, Horning suggests, lay in the greater cultural chasm
between Indians and English. While the Irish and the natives Americans shared some cultural characteristics,
these remained superficial. Irish clans and Indian tribes could be viewed as similar entities, but the ‘intensity
and time depth of the Irish chiefs’ relations with English and continental leaders and societies’ (p. 175)
makes the contrasts far more striking. At the same time, Horning argues, it is possible to compare European
Virginian settlements and Ulster plantation bawns, but any shared features appear superficial when set
against the stark differences between the local populations of Ireland and the New World. For example,
where English and Irish Christianity made for a shared spiritual framework of Latin liturgy, native religious
practices were unintelligible to Europeans.

On an intellectual level, the men who staffed the Irish and Virginian colonizing enterprises may have
labelled natives in both places savage heathens, but the archaeology of on-the-ground encounters paints a
contrasting picture in the later part of the 16th century. It is with these conclusions in mind that Horning then
returns the reader back to the fields of Ulster in her third chapter. In the period between the failure of
Roanoke in 1587 and the founding of Jamestown in 1607, the Irish plantation forged ahead. The English had
grand plans for the project, but much of the time these had to be amended to take account of financial and
local contingencies. Thus, Ulster was to be settled with crown money and private investment and, as in
Virginia, the settlement was constructed with native peoples in the midst of the English. This enterprise
involved many cultural exchanges and compromises between the two parties. Playing a major role in
settlement, the London Companies set about the creation of bawns that would house agricultural and
industrial enterprises such as cattle farms, sawmills, and brick kilns. These activities were accompanied by
legislative programmes to establish fairs, markets, and new towns. The efforts to expand towns in particular
were supported by some Gaelic elites, who saw the opportunity to increase their own authority. With Gaels
and English settlers drinking and socializing with each other, Irish craftsmen adapting English construction
plans to their own building practices and materials, and Irish elites adopting some English clothing fashions,
the two groups interacted to produce hybrid cultures to the extent that by the first decades of the 17th century
‘both archaeological and documentary records … divulge proximity and intimacy’ (p. 261). While the
project may have descended into brutal violence by the 1640s, the intervening period had seen continuities
in Gaelic lifeways, the creation of hybrid places and practices, as well as the successful realization of some
of parts of the crowns vision of settlement. Thus, Horning concludes, later violence should not prevent us
from seeing how earlier in the venture circumstances saw the English having to modify their ambitions to
the Irish people and their cultures. It is this situation that produced levels of cultural intermingling so much
greater in Ireland than they were in Virginia. This leads Horning to suggest that we should not strive to see
Ireland and America as ‘model and mirror’ (p. 353) but instead consider Ireland in the pre-1650 era as a
competing venture in the British Atlantic field of interaction. It is to the early 17th century, when Virginia
was most directly engaged in this competition with Ireland, that Horning therefore turns in her final chapter.

Reinforcing her argument that similarities between Old and New World colonies remained superficial,
Horning explores the tendency of those individuals actually involved to see Ireland and Virginia in
competition with each other for men and money. Hence, when the London Companies were recruited to
support the Irish planting project it prevented them from contributing much needed funds to the Virginia
venture. Furthermore, for those projectors focused on Ireland’s continued development, Virginia came to be
viewed as a convenient dumping ground for those not wanted there. Thus, while the Irish enterprise took
shape, its Virginian competitor struggled to find any way forward and soon colonists were facing a crisis of
resources the likes of which their Irish compatriots never had to confront. Horning notes how the
archaeology of Jamestown suggests that settlers dumped large quantities of usable weaponry, explaining that
such actions were a reflection of the extreme emotional stress that they faced during Virginia’s starving time.
In contrast, no such sites have been uncovered in Ireland. These contrasts mean that throughout the early
17th century, Ireland and the Chesapeake continued to be more different than they were alike – politically, socially, economically, religiously and culturally. As a result, the societies that took shape at this time should principally be viewed as ‘products of the locally situated cultural entanglements between natives and newcomers’ (p. 351). It is the multiplicity of such contrasts that then leads Horning to stress in her conclusion how what looks like similarity from the point of view of the comparative intellectual historian does not hold up so well when we move to (under)ground level. Indeed, the author also uses her concluding remarks to issue a salutary warning to historians working on an imperial or transnational framework. When conducting historical inquiry on the level of global connections, Horning argues, scholars should not forget the importance of ‘local nuance’. Falling victim to allure of the large-scale Atlantic canvas has caused inaccurate generalizations about the relationship between Ireland and America during the early colonization process, when in fact ‘the historical and cultural connections oft proclaimed for Ireland and North America are more the product of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Irish emigration’ (p. 367) than they were of the early modern era.

This is a conclusion that Horning has arrived at by carefully deploying the tools of the comparative cultural historian and historical archaeologist. What she has achieved that is new, therefore, is to look beyond the tendency of contemporaries to place Ireland and America, Gaels and Indians, together, and to review the relationship of the two enterprises on the basis of the much messier contingencies of everyday life. To achieve this, Horning traverses an impressive number of disciplinary and geographical boundaries, producing an intriguing meditation on what the English Atlantic world was in its earliest incarnation. As such, this book is a salutary reminder that as historians move towards ever larger scales of inquiry, they should nevertheless make sure that they integrate their approach with the insights provided by micro-history. Combining these two approaches is not easy and what Horning perhaps does not do quite so well is knit together her evidential base with that of the previous scholars who have tackled this topic on the broader intellectual and political planes. As such, she lays herself open to attack from those who may argue that what matters is the outlook of those rulers who saw both Irish and Native Americans as savages, and who felt no more akin to the Irish than the Indians as they sought brutal domination over both as soon as they could. It would have been helpful, therefore, if Horning had woven the outlook of elites more thoroughly into her analysis, which itself sometimes loses sight of the overall thrust of the argument as it presents detailed archaeological evidence. In her concluding comments, Horning highlights how the archaeological records reveal that ‘material accommodation and negotiation occurred at all levels of society’ (p. 363). While this is certainly the case, such negotiations need to be considered alongside those written expressions of power and might.

Notes


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