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MAKING EMPIRE

Ireland, imperialism, and the early modern world

JANE OHLMEYER

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Fifty years ago, it was standard practice for historians of England, Scotland and Ireland to ring-fence their national pasts as if the neighbouring realms were a world away rather than a sea or a marchland apart. Methodological nationalism was the reigning orthodoxy and only the odd heretic – usually from Ireland or Scotland – noticed there were Three Kingdoms or four nations (including the Welsh) in what were still prejudicially termed the "British" Isles. It took a thunderbolt from across the globe to shatter that consensus. A naturalized New Zealander of South African and Channel Islander descent, speaking from the University of Canterbury, called in 1973 for what he called a "New British History". This would treat "the conflict between, and creation of, societies and cultures" within the more neutrally defined "Atlantic archipelago" that spread overseas into the Caribbean and North America and then around the world through the circuits of the British Empire and its spectral successor, the Commonwealth.

The Jove who hurled that thunderbolt, J. G. A. Pocock, passed away in December 2023 at the age of ninety-nine, just three months before his 100th birthday. Born the subject of a king-emperor, George V, Pocock lived long enough to see his beloved Britain depart from a European Union he, as a staunch Commonwealth man, deplored as an ideological construct without an identity long before Euroscepticism became fashionable, let alone fissile, in British domestic politics. Pocock had also watched his vision of British history inspire a rolling revolution in the study of English, Scottish and Irish histories in successively archipelagic, colonial and global dimensions. He never wrote a multinational, polycentric British history – he had bulkier fish to fry, from his magisterial meditation on political impermanence, *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), to his six-volume homage to Edward Gibbon, *Barbarism and Religion* (1999–2015) – but he encouraged others to prove just how fertile his original provocation could be, not least for the national histories it was meant to unsettle.

Jane Ohlmeyer has done more than most historians to promote a new British – or, rather, British-and-Irish – history. In a formidably productive career spent mostly in Scottish and Irish universities, Ohlmeyer has followed Pocock's logic to place early modern Ireland and its peoples in ever expanding contexts: archipelagic, European and now global. Her earlier books concentrated on supranational aristocrats, but her work has always been attentive to Ireland's full social spectrum. ~~Her latest book,~~ *Making Empire: Ireland, Imperialism, and the Early Modern World*, derived from the 2021 Ford Lectures in British (*sic*) History at Oxford, is the fruit of a lifetime's reflection on Ireland's multiple histories and of Ohlmeyer's immersion in their burgeoning historiographies. The result is not just an exemplar of the now not so new British history: it is a model for deprovincializing any national history under the long shadow of empire.

"Like it or not", Ohlmeyer notes, "empire and colonialism have profoundly impacted Ireland and the Irish." The basic idea is hardly novel, of course: from the early seventeenth century, English planters imagined Ireland as set in a "Virginian sea", a launchpad and laboratory for colonial enterprises in the Atlantic world and beyond. By the mid-nineteenth century, Friedrich Engels expressed what had already become a cliché. "Ireland", he wrote to Karl Marx in 1856, "may be regarded as the first English colony", with wars of conquest from 1100 to 1850 leaving its people ruined and forced to wander the world: "they have the job of providing England, America, Australia, etc., with whores, day labourers, maquereaux [pimps], pickpockets, swindlers, beggars and other wretches".

Ohlmeyer's argument is far ampler and more nuanced than Engels's. She traces how empire made Ireland and how the Irish made empire from above and below, as proconsuls and protesters as well as soldiers and settlers. *Making Empire* focuses especially on what she terms the "First English Empire" between roughly 1550 and the 1770s, though medievalists would surely see that as the second (after the cross-Channel Angevin empire) or even the third such empire, bearing in mind the Norman conquests of Ireland. The driving forces behind this specifically colonial empire were manners, governance and land. The waves of English settlers came on a mission to civilize the "barbarous" Irish through anglicization, Reformation and the promotion of education, for example with the founding of Dublin's Trinity College in 1592 as a Protestant bulwark of "knowledge and civilitie" against "poperie" and "evill subietts". They tried out methods of control, such as intermarriage, martial law and surrender and the forcible purchase and resale of feudal holdings, that could be replicated in other colonial settings. And the creation of a pan-archipelagic market to commodify Irish land asserted English and, later, Anglo-Irish dominance while creating valuable capital to invest in other overseas ventures such as the East India Company. The anglicization project was swift and largely successful: as the Irish poet Fear Flatha Ó Gnímh (1540–1630) lamented, Gaelic Ireland had become "a new England in all but name" by the early seventeenth century.

Anglicization was only the beginning of Ireland's entanglement with empire. *Making Ireland*'s motto might have been, with apologies to Kipling, "What do they know of Ireland, that only England know?" Ohlmeyer draws illuminating parallels throughout with other European empires, particularly the Spanish and Portuguese, to show how typical English practices in Ireland were and how the Irish – inhabitants of a kingdom after 1541 but without the autonomy to create their own empire – "piggy-backed on the empires of others", beginning with Irish sailors on the voyages of Columbus and Magellan via the personnel of almost every European colonial empire, through to the Irish soldiers who populated British armies in South Asia, up to and including the famed Wellesley brothers. Such global links inspired inter-imperial comparisons among contemporaries: "Ireland is another India for the English, a more profitable India for them than the Indies were to the Spaniards", commented the fourth earl of Thomond in the reign of James VI and I.

Ireland's engagement with the Indian subcontinent forms *Making Ireland*'s most novel contribution. The traditional interest in westward expansion, with Ireland as the prototype for American settlement, played down the movement of Irishmen eastward, together with imperial methods first tested in Ireland, such as building forts as bridgeheads for territorial control: "Bombay was the Indian equivalent to the city of Derry", Ohlmeyer strikingly notes. Historians of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century British Empires have long noted how modes of policing honed in India were deployed against terrorists in Ireland who, in turn, inspired imitators back in India. Ohlmeyer demonstrates that such imperial blowback was nothing new, but was in fact continuous with a dialectic of resistance and repression that had been in play since the seventeenth century.

Making Empire also innovates by stressing more intimate aspects of empire. Ohlmeyer uses early portraits and novels, as well as archaeological reports and the rich depositions gathered in the wake of the 1641 Irish rebellion, to reveal the force of intercolonial exchanges on dress, consumption, gender relations and expanding imaginations in Ireland. A humble recipe from 1660, demanding sugar and cinnamon along with eggs and potatoes, conjures up "the world in a potato pie", while Ohlmeyer's deft use of recent Irish social history brings into sharp relief the contributions of women and children to the anglicization of Ireland and to the hibernicization of the British Empire. This is a truly new British-and-Irish history, encompassing far more than elites and men, and drawing on histories of cookery and slavery as well as those of sovereignty and conquest.

Every European country has its own form of imperial amnesia. "Many in Ireland have … either conveniently forgotten our imperial past", Ohlmeyer remarks, "or are simply oblivious to it." One book may not be sufficient to wake a nation from complacent postcolonial slumber or to fill the gaps left by inadequate education. At a time when knowledge of past Afro-Irish populations is growing and the Berkeley Library at Trinity College Dublin has been de-named in light of the eponymous philosopher's ownership of human beings, *Making Empire* has a better chance than most works of shifting consciousness of empire in Ireland. It might also accelerate awareness of Ireland's contributions to the enterprise of empire more broadly. That link was not lost on J. G. A. Pocock when he drew a parallel between Aotearoa/New Zealand's Pākehā settlers, like himself, and Northern Ireland's Orangemen. Because both were attached to a British home that conspicuouly failed to return the affection, he mordantly teased, "Ich bin auch ein Ulsterman": I, too, am an Ulsterman.

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