The Irish in the British Atlantic


Reviewed by Lee Morrissey, Clemson University

T.wentieth-century Irish author Benedict Kiely began a collection of his short stories in the best way—with a geography joke. After one character says that “‘Virginia…was the best place I ever saw for cider,’ his friend, just to annoy him, asked, ‘Virginia, County Cavan, Ireland?’” Of course the first speaker had been referring to the state of Virginia, one of the United States, not a small town in an Ulster border county in the Republic of Ireland. However, the joke raises larger issues, because it hinges on a shared moment in history, and maybe, just maybe, even a shared history. The Virginia colony and the town of Virginia were both founded in the early seventeenth century, the state at Jamestown in 1607 and the Irish town in 1612. Both, then, share an origin in a period of English colonial expansion, both in an increasingly anglophone Atlantic. Their shared timing is more than a coincidence: the English had plans to expand to the west in both Ireland and the western seaboard of the Atlantic. On the face of it, their histories are different. In Ireland, the English had centuries of experience, and indeed, centuries of prior settlers already in situ, all of whom were Christianized by the seventeenth century; in the new world, the English met native peoples with whom they had neither prior experience nor a shared set of religious references (“although,” as Audrey Horning points out, “whether being a non-Christian or being a Roman Catholic was more damning in English eyes remains a matter of some considerable debate”) (175). And yet, neither encounter fared extremely well. In the New World, the Jamestown colony was quickly wiped out, by disease and starvation; in Ireland the Ulster plantation fared better for a few decades, until the Irish rose up against the settlers, a rebellion that wound up contributing to the English Civil Wars of the 1640s and the Catholic Confederacy that governed Ireland with autonomy at the same time. By 1649, the Stuart monarch who had inherited the New World colonies and the Ulster plantation from his predecessor had been executed on a scaffold in Whitehall, London, and Cromwell was on his way to exact revenge in rebellious Ireland.

These geographic and historical realities serve as the background and context for Audrey Horning’s *Ireland in the Virginian Sea*. Her book has a resonant title that correctly suggests its relevance to anyone interested in transatlantic approaches to the early modern period in English-language history. Those familiar with colonial Anglo-American and with early modern Anglo-Irish history will remember that 1607 is the year in which the Virginian Company sort of established a settlement at Jamestown, Virginia; 1607 is also the year of the Flight of the Earls, the departure of the Irish leaders of the Nine Years War, after which their lands in Ulster were deemed “escheated” and thus available for English and Scottish plantation. The book’s title comes from Fynes Moryson, English travel writer, who in the early seventeenth century notoriously recorded his reflections on the Irish: “these wild Irish are not much unlike to wild Beasts.” His point, in the Virginian sea reference, operates on several different registers: it might refer to the Atlantic, linking
Ireland and Virginia, and thereby casting both as colonial projects; and it might also refer, as does the name of the U.S. state, to the Virgin Queen who governed England and Ireland, and thereby casting Ireland as part of the English monarchy. These two possible, alternative readings represent two poles of Anglo-Irish relations and tensions over the past 500 years: some see the English as an occupying force, oppressing natives who spoke, and still sometimes speak, another language; others see Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and Great Britain, and point to the Irish Parliament’s decision in 1541 to accept Henry VIII as king of Ireland. These two positions play themselves out in the opposition to the Free State treaty a century ago, and the creation of a partitioned Northern Ireland itself subdivided with miles-long walls (one of them, in Belfast, is three miles long and 45 feet high, separating Catholic and Protestant communities) to this day. For Horning, “what links Ireland with the New World is the haphazard character of English attempts to wield control” (18).

In other words, Audrey Horning’s new book wades into some powerful swirling historical currents, and does so with a subtitle, “Colonialism in the British Atlantic,” that aligns it with the colonial side of the “kingdom-or-colony?” divide. Indeed, Horning contends that “the settlement of Virginia and the Ulster Plantation…are more closely linked…than the sixteenth-century attempts at plantation…in Munster were…to the unsuccessful English efforts in the New World” (181). Horning is a professor of archaeology, and that field plays a central role in her contribution to the long-standing historical debate. Part of what Horning intends to contribute here is the evidence of the archaeological record; much of the historiography and politics, particularly in the Irish context, has relied on the archive, often on printed works, from the early modern period. Think, for example, The Irish Rebellion, John Temple’s 1642 London pamphlet about the violence visited on Protestants in the 1641 Ulster Rising. Such printed sources have all the advantages and disadvantages of print—close to the events, but not actually contemporaneous with them, and structured for rhetorical effect. The archaeological record, by contrast, shows how things were left, literally. Across the book, Horning repeatedly turns to the archaeological record as a way of intervening in the centuries-old arguments. As she notes early on, “Archaeological evidence can do far more than just illuminate the documentary record” (8). For Horning, the archaeological evidence can “offer a fresh look” (1). Thus, she cites, for example, “osteoarchaeological examination of the human remains from North Carolina Algonquin burials” (129). From the archaeological record, Horning shows that some Ulster settlements were “not solely derived from English traditions,” a point that attributes agency to the colonized Irish (230). It may not be an unrelated point when the archaeology also shows that the Irish builders of one new English home “neglected to employ mortar” (238). The reader is left to wonder whether Irish incompetence was, in fact, Irish competence. Moreover, Horning’s sense of archaeology is itself comparative; she begins with “acknowledgment of the very different approaches [to archaeology] employed by scholars” in Ireland and North America. The result is an important contribution to an important debate, recommended for anyone interested in transatlantic and archipelagic approaches to the early modern period.

The transatlantic anglophone currents described by Horning’s book are embodied in Sir Arthur Chichester who, having accompanied Francis Drake to the Caribbean in 1595, “would later become Irish Lord Deputy and preside over the implementation of the Ulster
Plantation” and was “a significant contributor to the drafting of Virginia’s royal charter” (82, 172). Indeed, the transatlantic anglophone colonial contexts can be seen in the fact that “seven of the Munster Plantation undertakers had already personally supported New World colonial ventures” (86). For anyone interested in transatlantic issues, these are important insights. Even among transatlanticists, Ireland and early American colonies are overlooked, “England” and “America” being the more legible terms. Among those interested in the related issues regarding the Atlantic Archipelago, the focus is usually on the British Isles. The framework of a shared colonial experiment in Ulster and Virginia makes for contrasts just as important as the comparisons: “In 1610, as their Virginia counterparts subsisted on bartered Indian corn and feverishly experimented with glass, iron, and pitch and tar production, the Irish Society embarked upon an ambitious building campaign for their principal settlement at Coleraine” (224). Of course, the failed wooden architecture of the early Jamestown settlement may also account for why this kind of historical work has not regularly been undertaken in the past.

Such concerns as there are about this book have to do with its organization and its accessibility. For example, the book has four chapters, an introduction and a conclusion, which would be fine, of course, except that they all overlap. The introduction is titled “Ireland and the Virginian Sea,” Chapter Two is titled “Across the Virginian Sea,” and Chapter Four is on “Creating Colonial Virginia.” That is, three chapters cite Virginia; how the approaches in each differ is not clear, neither at the beginning nor in the middle of the book. To make things more interesting, the first and second chapters have subtitles, which would seem to be where distinctions between the chapters might be highlighted. However, “The Sixteenth Century” and “Contact and Encounter” can amount to the same thing in the Irish context, and maybe on the western Atlantic as well. Even with their interconnections, Virginia and Ulster offered one simple organizational possibility: chapters on Virginia, and chapters on Ulster, perhaps arranged chronologically, including in that chronology the archaeological work of the last few decades that informs Horning’s project here. Another possibility would be to organize the book around personalities, e.g., Chichester, who recurs across several chapters. Or, the book could have been organized around the material evidence that constitutes Horning’s interest, and the basis of her contribution, e.g., settlement patterns, building types, and building materials. For those interested in the early modern transatlantic Anglo-Irish colonial experiment, this will be a valuable addition to the existing historical literature. For those newer to the early modern transatlantic discussion, this may prove to be a demanding reading experience as the author alternates between sides of the Atlantic and between the historiographic and the archaeological records.

Notes

2. Moryson, Fynes. A Description of Ireland. In An History of Ireland, From the Year 1599, to 1603. With a short Narration of the State of the Kingdom from the year 1169. To which is added A Description of Ireland. 2vols. (Dublin, 1735), 2:358-378, 377-378.