

# Why was Steven Ellis's *Ireland in the age of the Tudors* attacked by other historians of Ireland?

Drawn from William Palmer's review of Steven G. Ellis. *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule*, Longman, 0-58201-902-7:

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=6850949697544>, and

Steve Ellis, 'More Irish than the Irish themselves? - the 'Anglo-Irish' in Tudor Ireland', *History Ireland*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1999, pp 22-6)

In 1995 Steven G. Ellis published *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors 1447-1603*, a revised and considerably expanded version of his earlier work *Tudor Ireland: Crown, Community and the Conflict of Culture, 1470-1603*, originally published in 1985. It is not strictly a history of Ireland, 1447-1603. It is rather a study of Ireland's changing role in the Tudor state and the impact of Tudor rule in Ireland, with particular attention to its impact on the colonial community. It also offers a tern critique of traditional perspectives on the making of modern Ireland.

## Why was the book attacked in Ireland?

'In Ireland Ellis's views sometimes put him in the middle of a sort of historical no man's land, raked by machine gun fire from several pillboxes', because they strike at the heart of other cherished viewpoints.

Ellis's perspective: an administrative problem

For Ellis, Ireland as an essentially administrative problem for the Tudor state and one that was entirely solvable. Before the sixteenth century, Ireland did not occupy an exceptional position within English possessions. Royal control of Ireland was not always secure, but Ireland did not pose significant defensive problems, and Ireland was probably more of an asset in the eyes of English policymakers than a liability.

By Elizabeth's reign, much had changed from the early Tudor period by the design of English policy makers and English officials in Ireland. English culture and institutions had become dominant. English rule depended upon regular financial and military subventions. Moreover, as English policy became more interventionist, English officials became increasingly frustrated at the obstinance of various groups within Ireland and at the failure of successive attempts to extend English rule and influence. In the wider context of the history of the British state, according to Ellis, the Elizabethan Age marks a transitional phase between the gradual pattern of Tudor expansion and the emergence in the 1590s of a more aggressive policy of colonization.



Groat of Henry VIII - the heraldic motifs of the Irish harp and the royal crown are symbolically united

Earlier perspectives

Ellis's borderlands perspective puts him at odds with two other influential interpretations which see Ireland in a

- *colonial context* - a view held by, among others, Nicholas Canny, an Irish historian of colonial America, who believe that Ireland is best understood not as a borderland within the Tudor state, but as a colony within the English colonial system;<sup>1</sup> or a
- *a nationalist context* - the view of historians of the Irish nationalist tradition, who believe in the emergence of a kind of Hiberno-Norman unity in the early sixteenth century, who see an independent Ireland struggling to emerge, or who believe that historians 'have a duty to Ireland to record every indignity inflicted upon them by the English in the interest of preserving a national myth'.

## Nationalist critics

Ellis's fiercest critics were from historians in the Irish nationalist tradition, led by Father Brendan Bradshaw, a Catholic Irish history don at Cambridge, also a historian of sixteenth century Ireland.<sup>2</sup> They denounced *Tudor Ireland* 'for emptying the evidence of its traumatic content', and for failing to capture the 'catastrophic dimension' of the Irish historical experience. It also ranked among 'the nationally useless and undermining histories or pseudo-histories of Ireland written by Englishmen'.

Such critics attributed these lapses from nationalist orthodoxy to the Revisionists' lack of competence in Gaelic and therefore '*an neamhshuim a dhéanann siad d'fhoinsí Gaeilge*'; and they argued that a deliberate strategy underpinned Revisionist writings, including what was described as 'tacit evasion' - 'the simple expedient of ignoring the evidence'. Against such revisionism, some nationally-minded scholars called for 'present-centred history' or even 'purposeful

unhistoricity’.

### **Why was Ellis’s perspective so different?**

Geoffrey Elton

Ellis’s different perspective arise partly from personality and temperament but largely from his academic training as an administrative historian in English universities. One of his principal intellectual mentors was the late Sir Geoffrey Elton, whose Cambridge seminars Ellis began attending in the late 1970s. Elton began his career with dense administrative study, *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, while Ellis’s first book was a dense study of English administration in Ireland with an Eltonian title, *Reform and Revival: English Government in Ireland, 1470-1534*. Both based their books on intensive archival research.

Christopher Haigh

Another of Ellis’s mentors was Christopher Haigh, with whom he studied at Manchester. Haigh has argued that on the eve of the English Reformation the English Catholic Church was perfectly acceptable to most Englishmen. The Reformation in England altered a church that most of its followers liked. Ellis would similarly argue that up to about the 1540s English rule in Ireland was perfectly adequate. Ireland did not pose significant administrative problems, nor was it a drain on English resources.

### **How did Ellis respond to his nationalist critics?**

The best exposition of the gulf between Ellis and his critics is Ellis’s article ‘More Irish than the Irish themselves? - the ‘Anglo-Irish’ in Tudor Ireland’ (*History Ireland*, Spring 1999, pp 22-6). Here are two examples.

‘Present-centred history’

In the circumstances of modern Ireland, such criticisms are very understandable: given its divided present, with two states, each with its separate traditions and popular perceptions of the past, it is scarcely surprising that ‘the making of modern Ireland’ should also be contested. What is, however, surprising is the content of these criticisms. A feature of Tudor Ireland was its attempt to confront the reality of medieval Ireland’s partition before the Tudor conquest and the interaction between its two nations. Moreover, its focus on the revival of English influence from 1470 was manifestly also ‘present- centred’, although perhaps not in accordance with the nationalist agenda, since a common bond between the two Irish states since partition has been the continued predominance of English common law, language, and administrative structures in both.

*Cinniúint an náisiúin: scrios na nGael nó fás na nÉireannach?/The nation’s destiny: destroying the Gaedhil or raising the Éireannaigh?*

Another surprising aspect of this criticism is the call for more emphasis on Gaelic. Of course, the misfortunes the *Gaedhil* suffered through the Tudor conquest are more easily explained in their own language than in the queen’s English, the conquerors’ language. Yet traditional accounts in English are upbeat, focusing on the rise of Irish nationalism in opposition to the Tudor state, even though this was small compensation to the *Gaedhil* for the destruction of their culture, the expropriation of their lands, and Gaeldom’s partition between two foreign kingdoms of Ireland and Scotland.

The Tudor conquest spelled anglicisation - Ireland’s transformation into a ‘new England’. Yet studying the conquest through Gaelic does at least highlight the language’s terminological precision and flexibility regarding native perspectives on conquest - for instance, what terms like ‘English’ and ‘Irish’ actually meant. It also highlights just how little continuity there was between traditional Gaelic identity and the new Irish nation built on the ruins of Gaelic civilisation.

These comments are beside the point, however, since such nationalists are not serious about using the language (beyond parroting a few words for political reasons to those who have none). Galway has the only university history department with a tradition of teaching history through Gaelic; and as regards the Tudor conquest, for over twenty years the chief responsibility has rested with me ‘an anti-national Englishman’.

Yet choice of language carries a penalty: having opted for the conqueror’s language, nationally- minded historians cannot then expect to manipulate English terminology like Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*.

1. N.P. Canny, ‘The ideology of English colonization; from Ireland to America’, in William and Mary Quarterly, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., xxx.
2. Brendan Bradshaw, ‘Revising Irish history’ in D.Ó Cellaigh (ed.), *Reconsiderations of Irish history and culture*, 1994, pp 27-41; ‘Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland’ in *Interpreting Irish history: the debate on historical revisionism*, 1994, pp 191-216.