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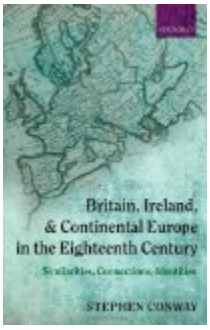
Stephen Conway. *Britain, Ireland, and Continental Europe in the Eighteenth Century: Similarities, Connections, Identities.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 384 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-921085-5.



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Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland in Europe

Stephen Conway's new book is boldly conceived, although rather modest in its conclusions, two things that are, in fact, closely related. Conway seeks to map the extent and importance of the multifarious connections between, on the one hand, Britain and Ireland and, on the other, continental Europe from the Glorious Revolution of 1689 to the Peace of Amiens in 1802, and to assess their impact on identities within the British Isles. No project of this kind can hope to be comprehensive, and Conway chooses to proceed thematically and through a mixture of evidence and case studies. Chapters examine, respectively, shifting conceptions of the constitutional and political settlement achieved between 1689 and 1701, the continental commitment in foreign policy, finance and trade, politeness and refinement, intellectual cultures, religion, the grand tour, earning a living abroad, service in the merchant marine or royal navy, and the military profession. There is some repetition, but overall the result is a wide ranging survey, one that is the product of formidable industry in the archives, together with extensive secondary reading.

If the goal were simply that of demonstrating the extent and range of interactions with Europe and things European, this is emphatically achieved. To the question of what role European connections played in the shaping of British society, culture, and politics, Conway's answer is a significant one, even if the degree and nature of this influence is at times under-specified. Quite a lot of the material Conway uses, moreover, to demonstrate this importance will be well known to specialists. Several chapters begin to read like lists of examples, and it is a bit difficult to see what Conway is arguing or rather the perspectives he adopts seem a bit odd. Chapter 3 on trade and finance sets up, to take one example, an opposition between national economic interests and a conception of an "international community of economic interests" (p. 105). It is not clear to me that these were necessarily alternatives, but in any case they were both fictions that hardly explain or indeed reflect "economic" behavior. Nor is it clear how either relates to what merchants did, within Europe or beyond. Looking at the book as a whole, however, Conway's mastery of a diverse body of material is impressive. He argues that the pattern of interaction remained important throughout the eighteenth century, seeing no significant diminution in the later eighteenth century. This might be surprising, in that there are strong reasons why one might have expected to discern a rather different picture, including, for example, the elimination of the Jacobite challenge to the Protestant and Hanoverian succession and the much-weakened commitment by the monarch to the interests of Hanover after the accession of George III. What Conway also firmly resists here is the tendency to emphasize empire as the crucial context for viewing British experiences and history from the Seven Years' War or even somewhat earlier than that. This book represents, in short, a powerful piece of advocacy for the primacy of Europe rather than empire or the Atlantic in the writing of eighteenth-century British and Irish history.

Connection, however, is only part of Conway's story. Another element is the extent to which interaction was an aspect of and helped to create a series of European identities and allegiances. Some of the most original sections of the book explore this theme in relation to the military profession and maritime activity. Soldiering bound Britons and Europeans together, or certainly the officer class, in an activity governed by common rules, practices, and understandings. This was partly why there was such relatively easy migration of personnel between the armies of different nations. There was, in Conway's phrase, a "military Europe," and the British and Irish were a part of it (p. 267).

Conway recognizes that evidence for identities is often elusive and difficult to interpret. Usually, it is an issue of striking a balance. Military activity acted as a natural focus for national sentiments and loyalty at the same time as it promoted awareness of a common European identity and experience. Which then should we emphasize? Or, to take another example, on the one hand, personal accounts of a grand tour often displayed a great deal of political and cultural complacency, a pervasive, even overweening sense of English or British superiority. On the other hand, they were part of a process that inculcated a habit of comparison and of thinking in European rather than simply national terms. They were also a product of an educational experience that equated gentility with familiarity with and knowledge of European culture and languages. It is to Conway's considerable credit that he does not duck these difficulties. At the same time, perhaps unsurprisingly, he has not always found ways of resolving them other than in tentative fashion.

Neither is it entirely clear in the end whether or how far Conway wishes to dispute the idea that national loyalties (however defined) strengthened in this period, not just in Britain but in Europe. A sharpened sense of Europe's distinctiveness and identity was not incompatible with a heightened sense of national identity and difference; indeed, the two might well and probably did feed off one another. One might well argue similarly in relation to the strengthening emphasis in this period on Europe as a community of states bound by the dictates of international law.

Equally, as Conway readily concedes, cosmopolitanism and national loyalties were not necessarily at odds with one another. Indeed in many spheres, they were different sides of the same coin; or rather they were inextricably bound up with one another, as for example, in much of intellectual life. Scottish enlightenment historian William Robertson saw himself as a Scot, a Briton, and a European, the point being that these loyalties were, in his eyes, entirely compatible. Robertson features at several points in this book, not least as a major figure in the development of a narrative that located eighteenth-century Britain within a European community of nations. More broadly, sometimes the question of which identity or loyalty was the more important, or in what context, is largely meaningless. In the end, Conway is not claiming, in any case, much more than that important European dimensions existed to identities in Britain and Ireland in this period. I doubt that any would seriously want to dispute this conclusion.

Cosmopolitanism also meant, of course, looking to "humanity" as a category of belonging, and so beyond Europe as well as beyond nation. There is a tension here that is not always made fully clear in the way in which Conway writes. This, in turn, can serve to highlight the potential dangers of seeing Europe and the wider world as separate. Thus, for example, if botanical learning involved cooperation within Europe, it also famously entailed sharing and cooperation beyond Europe's shores. Conway, to be fair, knows this, and recognizes that much of what he is writing about has an important global as well as European context.

Conway has, finally, written a book about Britain *and* Ireland in Europe. This adds appreciably to the interest of this volume, but also raises the question of differences between the nations involved. At various points, Conway touches on this question, although not in a concerted fashion. One answer he gives is to say that confessional differences were at least as important as national ones, and he has plenty to say, for example, on Catholic connections to Europe. However, this hardly disposes of the question. One might well wonder, for example, how far Scotland fits his general thesis of undiminished interaction, given the emphasis offered by Tom Devine and others in recent years on the centrality of the imperial context to Scottish experience and development in this period. He cites at one point figures showing a sharp reduction in British students studying at the University of Leiden after the mid-eighteenth century. One might surmise that many of those who might have gone to study there in the earlier period were by the later eighteenth century choosing instead to study at the University of Edinburgh or Glasgow. Conway acknowledges that together with religious division, geographical divisions could cut across national boundaries, in that communities in the east might look to the continent and those in the west across the Atlantic. Here again, however, things are not

always so simple, in that, for example, a great deal of the linen manufactured in the east of Scotland or in Ireland was destined for markets across the Atlantic, often dispatched via London. In the Scottish case, by the later eighteenth century, imperial and broader worldwide connections kept on coming into view, and one might well want to argue that Scotland shifted in this period from a basically north European orientation to a British and imperial one. Nor was the relevance of this simply Scottish. When Pitt the Younger, influenced by Scottish example, articulated his vision of Anglo-Irish union in 1799, it was an explicitly imperial identity which he held out to the Irish as something that would both reinforce and subsume national and confessional identities. One of the great merits of Conway's ambitious book is that it serves to remind us that the British and Irish were able in the eighteenth century to see themselves and their nations in a multiplicity of ways. The real challenge, as Conway recognizes, is to assess the extent and nature of their impact.

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