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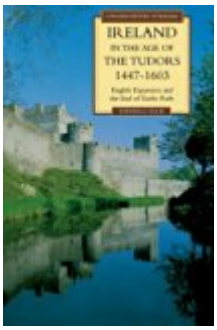

Steven G. Ellis. *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule.* New York: Longman, 1998. 358 pp. $55.00, textbook, ISBN 978-0-582-01901-0.

Reviewed by William Palmer

Published on H-Albion (January, 2000)

Steven G. Ellis' *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors* is a remarkable and welcome book. In a field where there are other contenders for the position, Ellis has emerged in the last decade as perhaps the premier historian of early modern Ireland, the person to whom scholars in the field look to the most for new ideas and inspiration. The present volume is a revised and considerably expanded version of Ellis' earlier classic, *Tudor Ireland: Crown, Community and the Conflict of Culture, 1470-1603*, originally published in 1985.

It should be noted that *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors* (the title pays a gracious tribute to Richard Bagwell's century-old, multi-volume, classic, *Ireland under the Tudors*) is not strictly a history of Ireland, 1447-1603. The book is really 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.

Ireland in the Age of the Tudors parades Ellis' strengths as a historian, especially his astonishing command of the subject. Ellis' erudition as revealed in the text is massive, truly Pelion piled upon Ossa, surpassing even that displayed in comparable and estimable volumes, such as Nicholas Canny's *From Reformation to Counter Reformation* or Colm Lennon's *Tudor Ireland*. Ellis' is the only text which reveals mastery of overall narrative, the intricacies of Irish politics, the minutia of day-to-day governance, the progress of religious reform, and the Gaelic response to English expansion. Other writers can match him on two or three aspects, but not all. And, even beyond the narrative, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors* is crammed with other kinds of useful information, including a timeline, a glossary of terms, detailed maps, massive bibliography, lists of all English deputies, key administrators, bishops, and archbishops in Ireland and their time of service, along with the dates of Parliaments and Great Councils, holders of Irish earldoms, and Gaelic chieftains. It is indispensable for anyone seriously interested Tudor Ireland.

Ireland in the Age of the Tudors is more than a compendium of information; it is that most welcome of volumes, an interpretive text where an author who has devoted his professional life to

the study of one subject, gets the opportunity to sit back and reflect. In Ellis' case, he has already taken one shot at a synthesis. And now, after another decade of work, he gets to try again. In this sense and several others, he resembles one of his principal intellectual mentors, the late Sir Geoffrey Elton, whose Cambridge seminars Ellis began attending in the late 1970s. 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***; Elton began his career with equally dense administrative study, ***The Tudor Revolution in Government***. Both based their books on intensive archival research, and in subsequent works, continued to concentrate their detailed research in a relatively narrow area: Elton on the 1530s in England, Ellis on Ireland and later the Far North of England from about 1470 to 1534. Both men were in their early thirties when they were offered the chance to write a textbook. Both responded with fairly iconoclastic works of synthesis and interpretation. And both received the opportunity to revise their views in subsequent textbooks.

Ellis resembles Elton in several other, more important, respects. Like Elton, he was first an administrative historian, a perspective which underscores his approach to history and to Irish history in particular. One advantage of administrative history is that there is usually a substantial body of original documents. Thus, history for both Ellis and Elton begins with archival work, and archival findings provide the basis for interpretation, not the other way around.

The second significance of Ellis as an administrative historian impacts the thesis of ***Ireland in the Age of the Tudors***. Ellis sees Ireland as an essentially administrative problem and one that was entirely solvable. In his view, 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. For Ellis, Ireland should be seen in the context of other English borderlands, such as the North, Calais, or Wales. If seen in this light, the "problem of Ireland" was probably little different and no more intractable than the "problem of the North." Here Ellis resembles another one of his mentors, 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.

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.

Another of Ellis' strengths as a historian is a willingness to challenge existing orthodoxies, even those hallowed by time, repetition, and emotion. In Ireland his views sometimes put him in the middle of a sort of historical no man's land, raked by machine gun fire from several pillboxes. This hostility is not surprising, since many of his views strike at the heart of other cherished viewpoints. He has been critical of Tudor historians

who try to write the history of sixteenth century with minimal reference to Ireland or the other borderlands. Ellis' borderlands perspective places him at odds with those, even his departmental colleague at the National University of Ireland in Galway, Nicholas Canny, who believe that Ireland is best understood not as a borderland within the Tudor state, but as a colony within the English colonial system. But Ellis' sternest admonitions are reserved for those 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.

Ellis is liable to some criticism along this line. Coming to Irish history from an administrative perspective and emphasizing the period before 1534 in his original research, Ellis does seem less sensitive than some other scholars to the increasingly aggressive policies pursued by the English after 1560. In *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors*, a text of three-hundred fifty eight pages, less than one-hundred are devoted to events after 1547, a period which most historians regard as far more significant historically than the earlier period more thoroughly discussed by Ellis.

A more serious criticism, however, can be leveled at the borderlands approach. While the borderlands approach offers a number of fresh insights, it also poses some problems. All the borderlands are not the same. Wales and Ireland were specific kingdoms in the Tudor state, while the North was an indeterminate region, and Calais was a city in France. Wales also seems quite different from Ireland or the North. In Glanmor Williams' history of early modern Wales, for example, one of his principal problems is to explaining the tranquility of Wales and absence of rebellion, which is not a problem for someone trying to write the history of early modern Ireland.

Ireland is perhaps most usefully compared with Scotland than with the other borderlands, even though Scotland was an independent country. Both Scotland and Ireland posed formidable difficulties to English national security owing the possibilities of foreign intrigue. For most of the first half of the sixteenth century, Scotland, in part through its close ties with France, was the borderland that the English, not so much for Scotland itself, but for the possibility that Scotland could be used as a base for a French invasion of England. By the second half of the sixteenth century, Ireland had acquired this role and had emerged as the most serious threat among the borderlands. As Counter Reformation acquired more force, Catholic powers, particularly Spain and papacy became increasingly interested in an invasion of England through Ireland or in fanning fears of such threats. While only a few of the threats materialized, English policy makers could not discount them, and many expected that the feared invasions would occur at any moment.

The failure to take account of this change is the primary weakness of *Ireland of the Age of the Tudors*. By the 1560s and 1570s, Ireland was no longer an administrative problem, or at least one which could be solved by administrative reform; it was a political and diplomatic problem. Without much discussion of this process and its implications, Ellis is hard pressed to explain how Ireland went from being an asset to the crown to being a drain on its resources. Poor decisions by administrators can explain part of it, but by the 1560s and 1570s policy makers were dealing with a potential problem for which there were not nearly enough resources to solve.

In closing, one last point should be made. The erudition of *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors* will be a strength to some, but a weakness to others. The writer of a survey text faces a number of choices, one of the most pressing is the choice between comprehensiveness and readability. Writers are usually aware that many readers will

want as much detail as possible and will use the book as much for reference than narrative. On the other hand, too much information hampers the readability of the text and deters the general reader. Ellis clearly elected comprehensiveness. The result is a book whose erudition is unlikely to be matched in the foreseeable future, but one which makes for difficult reading for the uninitiated.

Citation: William Palmer. Review of Ellis, Steven G. *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2000.

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