

Discuss English settlement in America in the early seventeenth century with reference to their previous settlement/plantation experience in Ireland.

Compared to the other European powers, that is, the Spanish, the French and the Dutch, the English started late in the establishment of colonies on the American continent. One of the reasons for this delay was that they were busy colonising Ireland, which they had begun to do in earnest in the second half of the sixteenth century. In many ways, the lessons learned in Ireland were then applied in America. Some of the leaders, such as Sir Humphrey Gilbert¹, were actually involved in both cases. The motivations of the settlers were comparable, and the clashes of cultures between the native populations and the colonisers were similar. However, colonisation in Ireland and in America did not follow the same routes, even if the initial plans and strategies were close. To understand the importance of the Irish experience in the English conquest of America, it is necessary to begin with a description of the situation in Ireland from 1550 to 1650, roughly. The same will be done for the colonisation of America after 1600, with a focus on Virginia and New England. Methods used in both cases will be compared. The justification of the colonisers and their treatment of the native population will be contrasted. Finally, the differences will be underlined, especially the divergence of outcomes afterwards.

In 1541, Henry VIII changed his title from ‘Lord of Ireland’ to ‘King of Ireland’, a symbolic but highly significant move². The involvement of the English Crown in Ireland dated from the twelfth century, but its influence had so far been limited to the

¹ See Taylor, p.123.

² Bardon, p.71

East and the South-East, the 'Pale', and the Gaelic lords had reclaimed a majority of their lost land. The initial scheme of 'Surrender and Re-grant' was supposed to see a transfer of allegiance to the King, but this was quickly abandoned in favour of a more aggressive strategy of subjugation, also driven by the idea of asserting Anglicanism over Catholicism. The threat posed by ambitious Gaelic lords such as Shane O'Neill demanded a radical solution: Sir Henry Sidney, named governor in 1565, planned to dispossess those fighting the Crown, and parcel their lands to English adventurers who would plant English settlers on them³. The Tudor re-conquest of Ireland was ruthless: Sir Humphrey Gilbert, fighting in Munster, decorated the path to his tent with human heads⁴! After the defeat of Hugh O'Neill at Kinsale in 1601, the Flight of the Earls in 1607 and the consequent power vacuum, the plantation scheme really took off, especially in Ulster and Munster⁵. The native Irish were transplanted, and their lands redistributed to English and Scottish settlers, to implant English civilisation: English law, tillage, Protestantism and urbanisation. In practice, however, the indigenous population remained on the land, but as tenants instead of owners, who were quite often absentee landlords, or rich merchants (for instance in the case of Londonderry). Cohabitation between Protestant settlers and Catholic natives was always edgy. The subjugation and dispossession of the latter was made even more complete after the brutal Cromwellian repression in 1649⁶.

This pattern of plantation, financed by private investors committed to settle and develop their allocated area, under loose supervision of the Crown, having proved itself

³ See *Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, p.125.

⁴ Taylor, p.123.

⁵ Foster, ch.3, 'Plantation: Theory and Practice'.

⁶ Bardon, ch.5. 'The Plantation of Ulster'.

successful in Ireland, was to be applied in America. This strategy was different from the centralised colonisation schemes employed by the Spanish and the French, and benefited all parties involved. The English Crown could potentially expand its empire at low cost and low risk, while the investors could now and then appeal to the mother country for military help or ships⁷. However, the first colonisation attempts were not plantations; what Walter Raleigh or Humphrey Gilbert had in mind was more the establishment of bases from which to plunder Spanish ships than anything else; they only mentioned colonies to gain backing for their ventures (as a convenient mean of getting rid of the threatening lower classes)⁸. It is only in Virginia after 1610 that the plantation system was used: emigrants were given fifty acres, plus as many per servant and family member brought over⁹. The production of tobacco enabled the plantations to take off. It developed the same kind of society as in colonial Ireland: the Big Houses, the few very wealthy planters and landlords dominating a majority of poor tenants¹⁰.

In Ireland as in America, the colonisers had to confront the native population: the 'Wild Irish' or the 'barbarous Indian'. To the Tudor Englishman, civilisation meant his own way of life: Protestantism, tillage, enclosure, English laws, domesticated animals, sedentary farming, and defined gender roles. Anything not fitting this description had to be inferior and barbaric. The fluidity of Gaelic society, with its Brehon laws, its fostering system, and the loose nature of land property was alien to the Elizabethan frame of mind,

⁷ See Brogan, ch.2, 'The Roots of English Colonization'.

⁸ Taylor, pp.118-119.

⁹ Taylor p.133.

¹⁰ Taylor, pp.150-152.

as was the relative independence of women and the semi-nomadic nature of agriculture¹¹. In the second half of the sixteenth century, moreover, religion became an additional factor. All of this made it easy to consider the Old Irish – and by association the Old English too – as the Other, exotic and inferior, a savage race deemed unfit to live on a land they were using in such an uncivilised way. By dehumanising them, it became easier to dispossess them, to transplant them, even to slaughter them: the fact that this way of life could also be attractive made it even more dangerous, and even more necessary to extirpate by conquest: the worst punishments were generally meted to those who were fighting against their own ‘race’, for instance Old English lords rebelling against the King¹². Of course, this was also a convenient way to justify colonisation and what was essentially land lust.

The same mentality prevailed amongst the English settlers in Virginia, and later on in New England. Unlike the French or the Dutch, the English did not really intend to develop trade with the natives¹³. As they had done in Ireland, they despised a culture they could not understand despite the fact that the initial settlers owed their survival to the Indians, be they the Powhatan in Virginia or the Wampanoags in New England¹⁴. Like the Old Irish, the tribes in these regions were semi-nomadic, organised around the community and not individuals. Warfare was sporadic but low in intensity, basically a series of vendettas¹⁵, as in Gaelic Ireland. The concept of individual property did not really exist, and even less the idea of land ownership. This was a culture even more fluid

¹¹ See Foster, ch.1, “‘Wild Shamrock Manners’: Ireland in 1600’.

¹² *Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, p.127.

¹³ Tindall & Shi, pp.72-73.

¹⁴ Brogan, ch.5 ‘Indians, 1492-1920’.

¹⁵ See Taylor, p.189.

than the one the English had encountered in Ireland, and they treated it even more harshly. As Taylor quotes, Sir William Herbert, talking from his experience in Ireland, indicated that the best way was “to do away with and destroy completely the habits and practices of the natives”¹⁶. The initial attempts to assimilate the natives were quickly followed by subjugation and slaughter. Harsh punishments expected settlers who switched sides, as happened for instance in Virginia in 1612¹⁷. As in Ireland, the colonisers justified their land grab by arguing, as John Winthrop did¹⁸, that the natives had forfeited their rights by not developing their territories properly. As in Ireland in the sixteenth century, the settlers used native rebellion as an excuse for extermination and dispossession, as in Virginia against the Powhatan in the 1620s and 1640s¹⁹, or in New England against the Pequots in 1637 or the Wampanoags in 1675²⁰.

There are, however, some important differences between colonial Ireland and America. In Ireland, the English settlers remained a minority, feeling threatened by a majority of Old Irish natives; these conditions actually motivated a lot of them to move from Ireland to America, in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Gaelic culture went underground, but remained strong and would resurface in the eighteenth century. In America, because of warfare and especially because of disease, the native population quickly declined and became a minority²¹. Possibly because they were, after all,

¹⁶ Taylor, p.128.

¹⁷ Taylor, pp.132-133.

¹⁸ In *Colonial American History*, pp.29-31: John Winthrop, ‘Reasons to Be Considered for Justifying the Undertakers of the Intended Plantation in New England and for Encouraging Such whose Hearts God shall Move to Join with Them in it (1629)’.

¹⁹ Taylor, p.135.

²⁰ Tindall & Shi, pp.72-77.

²¹ See Brogan, ‘Indians, 1492-1920’, ch.5.

Christians and white, the Irish natives were not considered – and treated - as badly as the Indians were.

It can be said that the colonisation of Ireland paved the way for the settlement of America, and that the Irish experience gave England the edge in establishing colonies in the New World, providing techniques such as plantation and loose government control, but probably quite as crucially in forging a brutal colonial mindset that could rationalise the spoliation of the indigenous population. The Pale would become, in an American context, the Frontier, the division between the civilised ‘Us’ and the wild, savage ‘Them’. The English concept of the necessity of the superior civilisation to make good use of the land would become the American idea of the ‘Manifest Destiny’.

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