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Additional Information:

- This is a journal article. It was published in the electronic journal, Early Modern Literary Studies and the definitive version is available at: http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/emlshome.html

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/6190

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Sheffield Hallam University (© Lisa Hopkins, Editor, 1999-2003)

Please cite the published version.
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Review by Dr Joan Fitzpatrick (University College Northampton, UK)

Nicholas Canny
Making Ireland British, 1580-1650
£55 hardback

In this book Nicholas Canny provides a detailed study of all the plantations attempted in Ireland between 1580 and 1650, the arguments advanced for a plantation policy, and the reactions provoked amongst those people closely affected. Most importantly, he recognises something not hitherto acknowledged: the enormous influence of Edmund Spenser upon subsequent advocates of plantation and in particular on Cromwell's effort to 'make Ireland British'. Canny is only too aware of the expectations with which readers will come to any history of Ireland. In the preface to this fascinating study he acknowledges that his desire to understand "the place of Ireland in the history of Britain's overseas expansion" may position him within the category of "what is now fashionably known as Atlantic History" (p. vii). Canny is also aware that his efforts to link events in Ireland with those in England and Scotland might place him "under the equally fashionable category of New British History" (p. vii) but is suspicious of fashions and, with refreshing honesty, puts his cards on the table: "I have, in the course of writing this book, and throughout my scholarly career, eschewed trends and orthodoxies; I have pursued my enquiry wherever the evidence leads me; and I have tried, whenever possible, to write from original sources with a view to understanding people, and the events in which they engaged, on their own terms" (p. vii). Canny takes his responsibilities as an historian seriously and although it is true to say that he is not a slavish follower of theoretical fashions neither is he ignorant of the recent debates which have shaped the study of Irish and English history and he cannot be accused of the narrow focus of which some historians are undoubtedly guilty since he attends to literary works as well as more conventional historical sources.

Of particular interest to literary scholars of the period is Canny's focus on the writings and ideas of Edmund Spenser, who he claims played a crucial role in Irish history and was more influential in shaping attitudes toward Ireland and the Irish than has hitherto been acknowledged. Being an historian, it might be expected that Canny would focus exclusively on Spenser's political tract, A View of the Present State of Ireland, but he considers also The Faerie Queene with a particular focus on Spenser's "glorification of violence when it is employed in a worthy cause" since Spenser considered that "the righteous must be prepared to take firm action to destroy evil influence if they themselves are to avoid perdition" (p.18). Canny considers the View with the literary critic's sensitivity to form, seeing parallels between the prose tract (traditionally considered an historical document despite the fact that it is a literary dialogue) and the poem: the "persistent straying" of the knights in The Faerie Queene from their responsibilities is echoed by the manner in which the speakers in the View deviate "from the plot they had laid down for their guidance" which serves to illustrate "Spenser's lack of confidence in the ability of any humans to attain a fixed purpose" (p.13). Canny is alert to Spenser's attitudes to the
interdisciplinary, noting that Spenser called himself 'a poet historical', considered himself responsible for offering guidance on current affairs, and called upon Clio, the muse of history, for help in the proem to Book 1 of *The Faerie Queene*. He wonders why Spenser abandoned his epic poem when it was only half-written and suggests that he became disillusioned by his poetical efforts to promote moral improvement and political reform. Since poetry had exposed him to criticism, Spenser made the decision to try a less oblique form of writing and thus composed the *View*. In his *Defence of Poetry* Philip Sidney asserted that poetry need not take the form of verse, an opinion which Canny thinks Spenser would have found encouraging since the format of the *View* would allow a greater directness than was possible with allegory.

Canny seeks to overturn some long-held assumptions about Spenser and his role in Ireland. He disagrees with the notion that Spenser was alienated from the queen and court, his only reward being exile and a small irregularly paid pension. Spenser had been given an estate in the Munster plantation for which there was substantial competition and so his being in Ireland could be regarded as something of an achievement. Canny also denies the commonly held assumption that violence was necessarily incompatible with humanism. Spenser made the radical proposal in the *View* that Ireland be refashioned into the perfect commonwealth and Canny contends that his account of the evil customs of the Irish, though rehearsing observations made by earlier writers such as Giraldus, broke new ground in tracing the genealogical origin of the Irish back to the Scythians. Because of their degeneration, the Old English could no longer be trusted with the job of reforming Ireland and their lapse meant that the policy of surrender and regrant, whereby ruling chieftains surrendered their lands to the king receiving them back as a fief from the crown, was no longer viable. Spenser, claims Canny, had pondered the problem of degeneration in a general way in *The Faerie Queene* but the revolutionary aspect of the proposal put forward in the *View* was to call on the crown to promote innovation rather than upholding existing authority. Canny notes that Spenser's programme for reform focussed on military order and a new authority to replace the Old English lords with the most radical proposal being that English governors in Ireland would have unrestricted power. The proposal was radical also in the low priority afforded to religion which could not be considered until existing social institutions had been destroyed.

In Canny's opinion Spenser's *View* was extremely influential, something not hitherto emphasised by historians on Ireland. Although it was not published during Spenser's lifetime, either because he did not intend it for publication or because he died before he could see it through the press (and Canny thinks the latter more likely), it was read in manuscript by influential people involved in Irish affairs during the decades following its publication and beyond. Canny claims that in the *View* Spenser voiced the commonly held opinions of those involved in government service in Ireland at the time, indeed Spenser's strongest recommendation, that Ireland would only be brought to order after military conquest and a programme of plantation, was adopted by the government when its remaining influence over Ireland was threatened in the violence that erupted in the 1590s.

Canny stresses the link between the Cromwellian settlement of Ireland in the 1650s and the plantations of the 1580s. The plantation scheme outlined in 1642 and
the Cromwellian settlement were, claims Canny, a continuation of what had been in process since the 1580s and, crucially, those who imposed the Cromwellian settlement on Ireland "were consciously pursuing the course set by Spenser and his fellow reformers during the late sixteenth century" (p. 552). Spenser and his followers had called for a violent re-structuring of Irish society and the rationalizations used by them would be exploited by the Cromwellians many decades later "to legitimize their policies" (p. 552). There was little new in English reports of the horrors of the 1641 rebellion but there was an emphasis on presenting the 1641 insurrection "as proof of what English commentators had been saying for decades, or even centuries, concerning the barbarity of Ireland and its inhabitants" (p. 555-556). The Cromwellian scheme adopted in the 1650s implemented advice offered by moderates since it limited the transportation of Catholics and allowed for the possibility of reform, but in cleansing Ireland of its enemies and forcing those remaining to attend Protestant services the scheme followed a distinctly Spenserian agenda. As Canny puts it, "they were, wittingly or unwittingly, systematically following the prescription for reforming the country that Spenser had recommended in 1596" (p. 557).

Aimed at a postgraduate and scholarly readership but of interest to any serious advanced undergraduate student, the inclusive nature of Canny's survey is one of its strengths and the study of neglected texts and documents alongside the more mainstream provides a detailed overview of debates surrounding a particularly fascinating period in Irish history. The strength of this book is Canny's lively and informative writing style, the skill with which he comprehensively yet clearly outlines a vast quantity of material, and his ability to freshly interpret writings which are both canonical and marginal, historical and literary. Canny is a fine historian but that he is sensitive to the enormous, and so far neglected, influence of a canonical English poet on the politics of plantation in Ireland demonstrates that the pessimistic view of historians, that they ignore literary scholars, is not always true.

Joan Fitzpatrick