



Review

Michael Silvestri

Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire, and Memory
Cambridge Imperial and Post-colonial Studies.

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Michael Silvestri's *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire, and Memory* explores the connections between Irish and Indian experiences of imperialism and anti-colonial nationalism in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Much has been written about the transnational and international nature of imperialism, as people, goods, and ideas moved across and through metropolitan and colonial borders. This field of scholarship mainly concentrates on the multi-directional relationship between colony and metropole as occupying a shared and mutually interdependent space. Other accounts have begun to tackle the connections and networks across colonies and colonized peoples. Within this emerging framework of analysis, studies about the connections between Ireland and India retain a preeminent place. This comes as no surprise given the historical treatment of Ireland and India as exceptional cases within the British Empire. Just as the Jewel in Britain's Crown India retains a special place in the history of the empire, Ireland, with its proximity to the colonial metropole and continental Europe, provides historians with a rich and long-lasting history of colonialism within the British Isles. Studies comparing, juxtaposing, and connecting these colonial histories have become the focus of a growing body of interdisciplinary literature in which Silvestri offers a welcome contribution.

In *Ireland and India*, Silvestri delivers a careful study of the complex position of Ireland within the British Empire. His primary aim is to "situate Irish national history in a transnational context" by drawing upon instances when Ireland's legacy has been cast as either imperialist or anti-imperialist (p.10). In his early chapters, Silvestri maps the connections that Irish and Indian anti-colonial nationalists made in North America before World War I and in Bengal during the Chittagong



Armory Raid in 1930. The later four chapters focus on Irish contributions to British imperial military campaigns in two instances, the 1857 revolt in India and the Connaught Ranger's Mutiny in 1920. In both moments, Silvestri provides a binary construction of the Irish as either British imperialist heroes or as anti-imperial nationalists. For Silvestri, Ireland is remembered and commemorated as both. Over the time, Irish soldiers constituting a substantial part of the British imperial military have been both valorized as upholders of the civilizing mission of Britain and of British imperialism on the one side and as harbingers of anti-colonial revolt across the empire on the other. Silvestri highlights the ambiguity and tension between these seemingly incompatible positions as both co-existed within the realm of Ireland's relationship to the British Empire.

Among his strongest and most convincing chapters are the ones studying Ireland's involvement in those formative events of Indian colonial history, the 1857 revolt and the 1920 Connaught Ranger's Mutiny. In the two chapters on the events of 1857, Silvestri traces the shifting positions of John Nicholson, an East India Company Officer from Ireland, who was fatally wounded in the recapture of Delhi in 1857. Through an extensive study of buildings and publications dedicated to his memory, Silvestri argues that Nicholson came to be commemorated in Ireland as a local and national hero, as well as a "British imperial hero and an embodiment of late Victorian and Edwardian masculine virtues" (p. 112) in India and Britain. This historical commemoration of Nicholson in the twentieth century – as an Irish and British hero – coexisted despite the complicated relationship between Ireland and the Britain after 1920.

Silvestri also tackles the complexity of remembering the Connaught Rangers Mutiny. Stationed in Punjab, the Connaught Rangers, a predominantly Irish regiment under the British, mutinied in 1920 in protest against British repression in Ireland. Once again, Silvestri demonstrates the ambiguous place of Ireland within Britain's crown colony. The Irish soldiers went to India in the service of empire, but came to be remembered in Ireland as anti-imperialist heroes despite scant evidence that the Rangers acted out of anti-colonial solidarity with India. In fact, according to Silvestri, the Connaught Rangers were well known for their hostility toward Indians. Silvestri's focus in this chapter remains on the commemoration of these mutineers from the perspective and sources of the Irish. This is the strength of his analy-



sis, but it raises questions about why the Connaught Rangers chose India as the stage to launch a mutiny against the metropole. Silvestri contextualizes the event in the broader history of political and social unrest in India around 1920 including the Amritsar massacre, non-cooperation, khilafat and Akali movements, but neglects the bigger issue of connections between Indian and Irish experiences of imperialism and anti-colonial resistance. To what extent did events and individuals in India shape the Connaught Ranger's decision to rebel against the crown? How and why does India become the site of their mutiny? How does the choice of India impact or shape the historical memory of the mutiny beyond Ireland?

The title, *Ireland and India*, is somewhat misleading, and South Asian specialists will be disappointed by Silvestri's contributions to scholarship on India. Much of Silvestri's work is a study of Ireland and not India. It is a collection of stories about the complicated role that Ireland played in the history of the British Empire against the backdrop of Indian nationalist and revolutionary politics. India provides the terrain in which Ireland's contested and ambiguous legacy as a colonizer and colonized is debated. Silvestri does this effectively and convincingly. Only two chapters draw upon Indian sources and perspectives to investigate connections with Ireland. The first traces Indian and Irish connections in North America before the First World War. In particular, Silvestri points to moments when the Irish-Americans lent financial support to Indian anti-colonial nationalists in North America, while Indians participated in Irish republican celebrations in places like New York City. Silvestri hinges his arguments about Irish and Indian connections on evidence of symbolic gestures in Irish-American and Indian publications. More attention to actual contact and engagements rather than symbolic and rhetorical gestures would make this study of connections more convincing.

The most significant chapter for South Asian specialists foregrounds the history of Bengali revolutionaries and what he calls the "The Sinn Fein of India." Silvestri argues that Bengali revolutionaries sought to "emulate the deeds of Irish republicans" and "Ireland became the most important model for physical-force nationalists in the province" (p. 47). Methodologically, Silvestri's argument depends heavily on recently opened colonial intelligence files to speak for the importance of Ireland in the minds of Bengali revolutionaries. This begs the question of whether his argument might pertain more to British anxieties over



Irish and Indian unrest, or whether the Bengali revolutionaries did, in fact, consider Ireland the greatest source of inspiration. Silvestri does pluck references to Ireland from Bengali publications to support his argument. Yet, this focus on rhetorical references in Bengali publications without concrete examples of how the Irish and Indian's shape one another's history raises the question: To what extent did these imaginative or metaphorical connections with Ireland impact revolutionary activity in Bengal? Silvestri suggests the armory raid in Chittagong in 1930 had been a conscious effort by Bengalis to emulate Ireland's Easter Uprising, yet the few references to Ireland in Bengali publications hardly supply enough evidence for this substantial claim about the influence Ireland had on Bengal.

Overall, one might also wonder to what extent the Irish model could be situated within the larger context of internationalism during the inter-war period. In the case of Bengal and elsewhere, the ethos of violence and revolution had significant connections to a number of internationalist rather than Irish models. The Bolshevik Revolution provided a potent blueprint for revolution and violence, and Indian revolutionaries and leftists across the political spectrum, including even the most mainstream nationalist, Jawaharlal Nehru, frequently spoke of the communist revolution as a great inspiration for anti-colonial revolt in India. To be sure, Indian revolutionaries and nationalists traveled the empire and read widely, and in this process, actively engaged and participated in a broader international sphere in the 1920s and 1930s. A fuller consideration of the internationalist milieu of the inter-war years might help situate the significance of the Irish in India. To push this point further, a South Asian specialist might also want to know more about the ways Bengali revolutionaries not only "emulated," but also selectively appropriated, reconfigured, and deployed a broad range of internationalist ideas about revolution that had emerged in the inter-war period.

Despite these shortcomings, Silvestri raises important preliminary questions for scholars of Ireland, India and the British Empire. Silvestri is at his best in three areas. First, his ability to capture the transnational and international dimensions of empire as Irishmen traveled North America and India as actors in a global story of imperialism and anti-imperialism. He also expands our understanding of Irish history and its complicated relationship with Britain and British imperialism. Scholars interested in thinking about the nation by recovering histories of empire 'at home' in Ireland will find Silvestri a welcome contribution.



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Finally, Silvestri's attention to the issues of historical memory and empire add an important dimension to our understanding of the shifting position of Ireland within Britain and the colonies. Though Silvestri does not effectively unpack the Indian perspective in his work, his book introduces a fresh topic in South Asian history in need of further study.

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