In a translated 1784 history of the Afghan people, the former Governor General of Bengal Henry Vansittart tellingly observed “I conceive that the knowledge of what a nation suppose themselves to be, may be interesting to a society like this, as well as of what they really are.”[[1]](#endnote-1) The motivation lurking behind questions of historical representations raised by Vansittart – the way in which a society would *like* to portray itself – demonstrates how the act of writing history is fraught with political and ideological meanings. These implications are particularly significant in imperial contexts such as the British Empire because of their comparative nature. Colonial histories not only contributed to British perceptions about indigenous peoples, but also reflected evolving notions regarding what it meant to be ‘British’. This led Nathaniel Crouch, for instance, to demonise portions of the population in his late seventeenth-century history of Ireland: “It was a proverb formerly, there was nothing venomous in Ireland, but the men and women, which was intended of the savage and brutish manners of the wild *Irish*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) While ostensibly about the Gaelic inhabitants of Ireland, the passage is rife with implications about the social hierarchies of the country, and, when read in context, it suggests that British intervention was necessary to eradicate this venom. This article adopts a triangular approach by comparing the early modern histories of Ireland and India to demonstrate how the British remained obsessed with colonial groups that subverted their authority, and the ways in which they recast these groups into comparable and demonised entities – while deliberately contrasting them with their own self-representations.

The first section briefly examines the changing focus of history writing between the early modern period and the turn of the nineteenth century, before looking at the specificities of the Irish and Indian contexts. These contexts are then connected by considering British attitudes towards religion in both places as depicted through the histories, a subject often treated separately by historians. Most importantly, this section argues that prior to the nineteenth century, the histories suggested that Catholicism and Islam were considered to have several similarities and were often depicted as corresponding forms of despotism. Additionally, religion and religious figures became intrinsic elements of so-called indigenous identity. The final section then compares two pivotal moments in early modern Irish and Indian history, the 1641 Rebellion and the Black Hole of Calcutta. In linking these events, it demonstrates how the commemoration of specific events was employed in later accounts as warnings, and as a justification for further British expansion.

In order to understand these connections, it is first necessary to unpack the connections between Ireland and India, as well as early modern history writing practices. Ireland’s ambivalent position in empire and its participation in imperial expansion have previously been noted by historians such as Stephen Conway and Thomas Bartlett, while scholars such as Barry Crosbie, Tadhg Foley, and Maureen O’Connor have examined specific connections between Ireland and India after 1800.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, no such comparative studies exist for the earlier period. Thus, this article contributes to the growing historiography situating Irish history within the larger framework of empire. The comparison between Ireland and India may initially appear counter-intuitive given the traditional emphasis on Ireland as a settler colony, in contrast to the mercantilism of the East India Company (EIC).[[4]](#endnote-4) On the surface, Ireland shares more commonalities with the settler-based North American colonies.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, there is a well-established literature on the EIC, exemplified by the works of Philip Lawson and Philip Stern, challenging its purely mercantile nature and arguing that elements of sovereignty can be traced back to the seventeenth century. One need only consider Company official Luke Scrafton’s description of the EIC following the Battle of Plassey in 1757. “No longer considered mere merchants,” he wrote, “they were now thought the umpires of Hindostan.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Furthermore, a major premise for the North American colonial endeavours was the (erroneous) assumption that the land was ownerless. Conversely, in Ireland and India the British were confronted by manifestly settled societies with recognisable elements of so-called civility. In this sense, the Irish and Indian contexts bear closer resemblances than many other colonial territories.

With respect to chronology, this article does not suggest a continuous line of history-writing practices in both areas, nor does it suggest that one unified vision of ‘Britons’ and ‘others’ emerged through these histories. Kathleen Wilson notably cautions against characterising British colonial views as homogenous and emphasises the imperial uncertainties reflected throughout contemporary accounts.[[7]](#endnote-7) Most Irish historians had ecclesiastical or government affiliations, displaying varying degrees of hostility towards Irish Catholics. Conversely, Gaelic-language authors represented an Irish elite severely affected by seventeenth-century transplantation policies and, therefore, hostile to the administration. In India, most histories were produced by Company officials or antiquarians to provide guidelines for, or critiques of, the EIC administration. Nonetheless, it remains possible to uncover discrete instances in these traditions betraying broader assumptions about religion and civility in colonial sites. The article compares the histories of Ireland from the second half of the 1600s with Indian ones of the late 1700s to demonstrate how specific points resurfaced in both narratives implying parallel British approaches to indigenous forms of religion and government throughout the Empire. The chosen periodisation is also noteworthy since these cases represent the crucial periods in which the British either formalised or formally assumed administrative control of these areas. Despite a longstanding English presence in Ireland, more complete territorial control was only achieved following the Cromwellian transplantation policies of the 1650s, when the amount of land owned by Irish Catholics shrank from more than 60 per cent to less than 20 per cent.[[8]](#endnote-8) Similarly, the decades following the 1757 EIC victory at Plassey were marked by increased – though contested – state control over an expanding portion of the subcontinent.

Following the emergence of humanism, early modern historical writing was intended to provide examples for better modes of government, as well as emotive experiences for readers. While history retained this goal after 1700, it outgrew its purpose as a “mirror” of the present and became a medium to contextualise contemporary events.[[9]](#endnote-9) These changes were strongly influenced by Enlightenment theories concerning a stadial view of progress based on degrees of civilisation. In an era of increasing European expansion, this significantly impacted historians’ assessments of other people.[[10]](#endnote-10) Finally, a growing stress on source reliability, derived from the works of sixteenth-century jurists such as Jean Bodin, produced such an emphasis on the necessity for historical veracity that it was viewed as “*lux veritatis*,” or the light of truth.[[11]](#endnote-11) Given the mythologised nature of many indigenous Irish and Indian histories, this seriously impacted their perceived utility among British historians.

A recurring theme in Irish histories is the religious and/or ethnic affiliation of social groups, alternatively considered as one unified or two distinct element(s). Individuals identified not only as Catholic or Protestant, but equally – or additionally – as Gaelic Irish, Old English (settlers predating the Reformation), New English, or British Scot. Although Bartlett, among others, highlights the lack of sectarian conflicts in mid-century Ireland, identification nonetheless became more religiously demarcated following the 1798 Rebellion. Despite a context of growing tolerance and the repeal of the penal laws, it remains significant that Bartlett himself notes the fierce opposition to Catholic participation in Parliament that remained at the turn of the century. More generally, Catholicism and Protestantism were increasingly associated with ‘Irish’ and ‘British’ respectively as of the mid-1600s.[[12]](#endnote-12)

One central component of expanding British authority in India was the conviction that knowledge would create a more efficient administration. Late eighteenth-century authors therefore sought to create banks of knowledge about the subcontinent. These would supposedly provide a greater understanding of current religious, political, and economic realities and would, in turn, ensure that the British ruled in agreement with local customs. The creation of these banks, as noted by C.A. Bayly, represented “an essential task if they [the colonial powers] were to build an intelligence system capable of securing their grip on the territory’s resources”.[[13]](#endnote-13) This emphasis on ‘understanding’ India represents a significant departure from the Irish context, where the histories presented the English conquest as a distant *fait accompli*. Indeed, Kate Teltscher notes that the tenuous nature of the EIC’s power led eighteenth-century historians to fixate on the argument that a British presence in India was both legitimate and desirable. This entailed the production of tailored accounts in which, P.J. Marshall argues, “nearly all comment on India was (…) inspired by men with particular axes to grind”.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nevertheless, a chronological analysis of Indian histories reveals how religion became a noteworthy signpost of identification by the last few decades of the 1700s, with increasingly stark differences drawn between the Hindu and Muslim populations.[[15]](#endnote-15)

One of Teltscher’s most intriguing observations on British writings is the tension she identifies between their depiction of Britons as just administrators (who could and should have control of India) and the almost obsessive fear that British authority would be subverted by subaltern groups. Fear also plays a key role in Partha Chatterjee’s analysis of the 1756 Black Hole of Calcutta and its subsequent retellings, where he focuses on British reactions to the prisoners’ ill-treatment as the pivotal point of the accounts.[[16]](#endnote-16) Teltscher’s comments on eighteenth-century India can be extended to Ireland and, more broadly, to colonies throughout the empire. Later seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century histories of Ireland were written in periods of uncertainty and sectarian instability, or immediately following such times. British-produced histories of different colonial areas therefore represent an important platform to understand such concerns, as well as the continuous British struggle to balance their sense of superiority with that of fear.

**Which history?**

Written in English and intended for British or Anglo-Irish audiences, Irish histories were designed to foster closer ties between Britain and Ireland. Pro-British Irish histories primarily sought to justify or explain English involvement with the country throughout the centuries. Although pro-Gaelic accounts proudly described the island’s ancient and cultivated past, pro-British accounts such as the one by historian and parliamentarian Edmund Borlase dismissed pre-twelfth-century Irish history as spurious and insufficiently documented.[[17]](#endnote-17) Conversely, many early histories of India were translated compilations of Persian accounts (or relied heavily on previous translations). As a rule, these histories were viewed as tools in the EIC arsenal to better understand local traditions and thus better administer the territory, though many were later published for the general British public.

A parallel practice exists in both traditions whereby the British described themselves as secondary actors in local events. Consequently, the British were never the instigators of the conflicts leading to their assumption of power; rather, their actions were reactionary and they were therefore transformed into bystanders responding to internal conflicts. In the pro-Gaelic tradition, the infidelity of Diarmait Mac Murchada, king of Leinster, sparked an armed conflict with the High King of Ireland, forcing Mac Murchada to seek the assistance of Henry Plantagenet. Promising aid and troops, Henry promptly invaded the country under the pretext of reinstating Mac Murchada to the Leinster throne. The major premise of this interpretation, first promoted in Geoffrey Keating’s seminal history (c. 1634), was that Ireland had never been conquered by the English. Instead, the Irish chieftains “made peace and friendly alliance” with the English king to avoid outright defeat in battle.[[18]](#endnote-18) This distinction was crucial in refuting contemporary English claims to Irish sovereignty; such claims, drawn from the writings of the twelfth-century author Giraldus Cambrensis, were widely circulated and reprinted in the early modern period.[[19]](#endnote-19) First articulated by Cambrensis and then adopted by early modern English authors, the conquest argument was used to justify English plantations and to portray Irish rebellions as treasonous acts against the legitimate ruler of Ireland.

Unsurprisingly, pro-British authors followed in Cambrensis’s wake. More importantly, these historians framed their arguments in moral terms, significantly altering the tone of their narrative. Authors such as Edmund Borlase, the influential historian of the 1641 Rebellion John Temple, and particularly Richard Cox, who became Lord Chancellor of Ireland in 1703, attributed the conquest’s just nature to the depraved nature of the Irish character. These histories abounded with tales of Irish piracy against western Britain and the enslavement of innocent Britons, irregular religious practices, and even cannibalism.[[20]](#endnote-20) This version also contended that the English received not the “alliance” described by Keating, but rather the Irish lords’ absolute submission. Nathaniel Crouch and George Stacpoole, for example, suggested that contemporary rebels were reneging on the oaths of honour sworn by their ancestors. Crouch’s late seventeenth-century account is of particular interest given his prolific career: a bookseller and author, he published inexpensive historical accounts that were widely accessible to the general public.[[21]](#endnote-21) Whereas other accounts might have been more difficult to obtain, Crouch’s history was readily available for dissemination.

In comparison, with the exception of antiquarians, historians of India concentrated on the numerous transfers of power in the pivotal eighteenth-century Mughal Empire and its successor kingdoms. This is best seen in the anonymous *A complete history of the war in India, from the year 1749 to the taking of Pondicherry in 1761*, which maintained that the British cherished no imperial ambitions and were drawn into regional conflicts as the allies of Indian rulers. This point was picked up by several contemporary historians such as Alexander Dow, an EIC officer and critic, as well as the Company’s official historiographer Robert Orme. Both men notably maintained that the Mughal Empire fell into decline following Aurangzeb’s death in 1707, which prompted decades of instability.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The second major point in these histories was that the British were forced to intervene in regional squabbles to save India from its own corrupt rulers and to stop French intrigues on the subcontinent. Scrafton insisted that this necessity arose as a direct consequence of the Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula’s wicked character. In the passage describing Siraj’s execution after Plassey, Scrafton cautioned his readers against feelings of remorse or pity, for “let us not forget how justly he deserved it. From his first obtaining power under his grandfather, he had ever made it subservient to ambition, revenge, and cruelty.” It is worth briefly noting Scrafton’s background and longstanding experience with the Bengal court, which would have lent his account an aura of authority among Britons: a negotiator in the coup against Siraj, he was also the first Resident at Mir Jafar Ali Khan’s court after Plassey.[[23]](#endnote-23) Widening the theatre to an international level, European conflicts were also blamed for the EIC’s acquisition of power. In EIC director Charles Grant’s estimation, British involvement grew out of French “ambition” rather than their own volition. Viewed from this perspective, early EIC activity was motivated by the need for self-defence against French meddling in Indian politics along the Coromandel Coast – inaction would have led to French supremacy in India.[[24]](#endnote-24)

**The point of convergence**

In spite of the extended time period between the early modern Irish and eighteenth-century Indian histories, these traditions remain comparable, especially concerning British approaches to religion. As a result of sectarian strife, religion represented a more obvious focus in Irish histories. However, a deeper analysis reveals important religious motivations in both traditions, where Catholicism and Islam emerged as similar forms of despotism. Moreover, religion became an important marker of comparison between the British and local populations. Tillman Nechtman identifies this trend in his analysis of eighteenth-century British nabobs, highlighting India’s influence on domestic British views of self. “An imagined India,” according to Nechtman, “became the foundation for a chimerical Britain. It was only because they had imagined India as small, primitive, and conquerable that Britons could continue to see Britain as large, civilized, and the conqueror.”[[25]](#endnote-25) It is rather overstating matters to claim that the British saw India as “primitive”. Though the accounts stressed the stagnant quality of Indian society, few eighteenth-century historians argued that it had not achieved at least a partial degree of civility. Nevertheless, India was constantly compared to Britain… and found lacking.

The Gaelic elites and the Mughals were similarly depicted as domineering rulers, in violent contrast to a supposedly liberal and tolerant Britain. While Linda Colley has previously argued that Britons increasingly defined themselves in contrast to Catholicism in this period,[[26]](#endnote-26) Islam also became an important counterpart in the Indian context. These concerns were bluntly expressed in Ireland through the implementation of the penal laws as of the 1690s. While these were gradually relaxed in the second half of the 1700s, deep-seated prejudices against Catholics persisted. Penelope Carson contends that in India, the EIC adopted a policy of religious non-interference in the interest of stability, since “questions of economic and political advantage were never far away”.[[27]](#endnote-27) This was certainly the *official* position, but does not allow for the impact of ideological concerns. British attempts to reform the legal system from the end of the eighteenth century demonstrate a growing disregard for indigenous-based verdicts deemed insufficiently punitive or unnaturally cruel. In such cases, the EIC readily circumvented religious scholars’ pronouncements.[[28]](#endnote-28) The Catholic/Muslim equation was rendered explicit in a pamphlet rebuttal by Samuel Barber against the Lord Bishop of Cloyne in 1787. Acerbically critical of the religious situation in Ireland, he sneeringly wrote: “[i]t would be a Herculean labour indeed, which would probably exceed *even* your eminent abilities, to defend the establishment of mahometanism in the east; popery, prelacy and presbytery in the west.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Barber’s stance is particularly striking considering his background as an advocate for the repeal of the penal laws.[[30]](#endnote-30) It demonstrates the extent of anti-Catholic sentiment in the late eighteenth century, which remained sufficiently pervasive to colour the views of a man with known sympathies for Irish Catholics. The religious element in these histories, especially descriptions of religious figures’ power, is significant and points to larger British concerns regarding non-Protestant manifestations of colonial religious belief.

The emphasis on despotism in both historical traditions suggests that these religions transformed their rulers into tyrants. The ancient Irish lords were repeatedly portrayed as merciless oppressors of the peasantry, inheriting through brute strength rather than primogeniture (not unlike the Mughals). Indeed, many accounts depicted these lords as European equivalents of Asian despots, governing through fear instead of righteousness.[[31]](#endnote-31) An association between Catholicism and violence quickly became central to descriptions of ancient Ireland, and provided a major justification for the twelfth-century conquest. Pushing this association further, histories postdating the 1641 Rebellion repeatedly stressed the dangers of a potential Catholic resurgence, and Catholicism itself was often blamed as a corrupt force. The Trinity College Dublin academic and clergyman Thomas Leland offered as proof the short-lived Catholic administration under the Lord Deputy Tyrconnell in the 1780s, characterising it as a stain on the country’s history. “The whole kingdom,” he wrote, “[was] now refounded with complaints of the meanness, the ignorance, and brutality of the popish sheriffs, scandalous partialities in the courts of justice, and the insolence and barbarities of military officers.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Such accounts made it clear that this desperate situation would normalise under a long-term Catholic administration.

This nefarious association with Catholicism was further reinforced through descriptions of the clergy as the architects of social and political discord. Historians routinely attributed the problems of Ireland to the Catholic clergy, including the numerous bloody rebellions through the centuries. This trend is epitomised by Crouch’s provocative claim that “Ireland, has for several ages been an Aceldama, or field of slaughter (…); occasioned by their repeated rebellions, and inveterate aversion to the English nation, in pursuance whereof, they have left no treacheries, murders, or villanies [sic] unattempted, being incouraged [sic] thereto by their ignorant and superstitious priests, to whose dictates, this stupid people entirely submit.”[[33]](#endnote-33) The agitation of priests was once again singled out as the most influential factor in the 1641 Rebellion. In Temple’s vehemently anti-Catholic account, he accused the priests of openly endorsing the murder of innocent Protestants, “telling the people that they were hereticks [sic], and not to be suffered any longer to live among them; that it were no more sin to kill an *English-man*, than to kill a dog”.[[34]](#endnote-34) This prejudice against Catholicism persisted throughout the eighteenth century, despite the fact that this period is generally regarded as one of growing toleration. A lengthy footnote in Grant’s tract on India reveals the deep ambivalence still felt towards Catholics in the 1790s. Claiming that Scotland had, at that point, been successfully reformed through the introduction of Protestantism, Grant maintained that Ireland remained problematic *because* Catholicism endured among the peasantry.[[35]](#endnote-35)

By the end of the seventeenth century, Europeans had a detailed, if generally negative, understanding of Islam. Considered a form of divine punishment for the sins of Christians, Mahommed was largely viewed as “a power-crazed fanatic” who had corrupted Jewish and Christian doctrines.[[36]](#endnote-36) In the Indian context, arguments for an increased British presence were grounded on the conviction that Mughal governance had disintegrated through despotism. Vitally, this manifested itself through sustained references to Muslim rulers as inherent despots, indicating a close correlation between Islam and despotism in the eighteenth-century British mind. Violence was also central to British views of Indian fanaticism. Within this narrative, Islam was transformed into an integral characteristic of Mughal leaders, thereby rendering them comparable to the controlling figures of the Irish priests. It is telling that the only emperor singled out for praise by the British was Akbar, famed for his religious tolerance. Indeed, the Scottish historian William Robertson, who openly encouraged the better treatment of Indians elsewhere, was moved to describe Akbar as “the only one of Mahomedan race” not blinded by fanaticism.[[37]](#endnote-37) Meanwhile, Dow devoted large portions of his history to descriptions of Muslim persecutions against Hindus. Echoing the imagery of Irish Catholicism, he wrote: “[t]he faith of Mahommed is peculiarly calculated for despotism; and it is one of the greatest causes which must fix for ever [sic] the duration of that species of government in the East.”[[38]](#endnote-38)

The lack of inheritance laws based on primogeniture and the damage caused by the succession wars of the mid-sixteenth century onwards were portrayed as symptomatic of a fundamental problem with the Mughal administration in the works of Alexander Dow and H.Z. Holwell, an EIC official and survivor of the Black Hole. Variations on this theme are found in virtually all contemporary historical accounts, but these two histories are worth prioritising because of their widespread dissemination in Britain, and their translation into several European languages. They would, consequently, have been amongst the most widely read accounts of India.[[39]](#endnote-39) While Hinduism became the target for reform in the nineteenth century, prior to this it was depicted as the weak and passive victim of an aggressive Islam. Dow presented the Mughals as invading aliens, and their rulers’ adherence to Islam was synonymous with despotism. Even the act of conversion was depicted in quasi-violent terms, since Mahommed supposedly “enslaved the mind as well as the body” of his followers.[[40]](#endnote-40) Similarly, Holwell made explicit reference to Hindus as victims who were “labouring under *Mahometan* tyranny, but fated, I hope, soon to feel the blessing of a mild *British* government”.[[41]](#endnote-41) The comparison between Hindus and Muslims reinforced the violent nature of Islam and provided a justification for British intervention.

The negative portrayal of Catholicism and Islam served a specific ideological and political purpose in the context of the expanding empire: to cast British intervention in a positive, even benevolent, light. In comparison, depictions of Catholicism and Islam, crucially defined in terms of fanaticism, transformed these religions into the antagonists of British-produced narratives. Descriptions of the Irish peasantry held in thrall by wicked Irish lords and priests provided the justification for the twelfth-century conquest: given the oppressive nature of these authority figures, the English had a moral obligation to conquer Ireland and deliver the ignorant peasantry. The motif of the British as saviours also found traction in India. In the context of the later eighteenth-century, Muslim leaders such as the Mughals and the rulers of Mysore represented a greater political threat to British expansion on the subcontinent than Hinduism. It was therefore more politically expedient for the British to portray Islam negatively, even though many historians expressed admiration for elements of the Muslim faith.[[42]](#endnote-42) Emphasising these points enabled the British to set up a comparison between themselves and their colonial subjects, in which religion became an important marker of distinction.

**The watershed moment**

The final section of this paper considers the ways in which British-produced histories commemorated specific events to underline the treacherous and untrustworthy nature of the Irish and Indians. These events served as reminders that the British could never assume safety from insurrection, regardless of how complacent they might grow in colonial settings. Conversely, while commemoration fanned a sense of paranoia, it also emphasised the eventual triumph of Britain over its foes, consequently offering the comforting image of the Briton’s ability to rise above adversity. This last point is particularly relevant to discussions of both the 1641 Rebellion and retellings of the Black Hole of Calcutta. Linking these two events are the concepts of revenge and redemption, as well as the British appropriation of forms of violence in colonial settings. Discussing the events surrounding the Irish context, Eamon Darcy notes that “[a] key element in early modern colonial policy is revenge. English colonisers called for vengeance and re-colonisation when natives rebelled against their overlords.”[[43]](#endnote-43) This section argues that revenge played a crucial role in the commemoration of these two events, simultaneously feeding a pervasive aura of fear and justifying further intervention.

In 1641, a large faction of the Gaelic Irish rebelled against the English, plunging the country into a decade-long conflict that quickly became conflated with religion. While Catholic leaders denied a religious motivation at the time, the Protestant administration fervently believed that the rebellion was a longstanding Catholic plot, which significantly coloured their interpretation of the event. The absolute insistence by pro-British historians on its unjustified and unprovoked nature transformed the rebellion into a monumental Irish betrayal. With morbid relish, historians such as Temple and Cox produced detailed lists of supposed Catholic atrocities.[[44]](#endnote-44) Crouch was particularly blunt in this regard, maintaining that the unexpected nature of the rebellion meant “[a]ll bonds of faith and friendship were now broken, the Irish land-lords made prey of their English tennants [sic]; Irish tenants and servants made a sacrifice of their English landlords and masters.”[[45]](#endnote-45) The recurring emphasis on the element of surprise provided an important reminder that the British could never assume to have fully understood their Irish subjects. The speed with which the rebellion was transformed into a ‘Catholic plot’ reflected a larger sense of distrust towards the native Irish, and a belief in their treacherous nature. However, it also set the stage for the Cromwellian transplantation policies of the 1650s, and the dispossession of Catholic landlords throughout the country, thereby ensuring the rise of the Protestant ascendency. Although there were strong financial motivations behind the land confiscations, there is also a strong sense of ideology and of punishment. Presenting the political considerations guiding the policies aimed to prevent future outbreaks, a particularly bitter anti-Catholic tract from 1673 explained the strategy of exiling Catholic landlords to the western provinces of Ireland as a calculated tactical strategy. “Should the *Irish* at any time appear to stir in the least to oppose the ruling power, it were no less then wilfully to expose themselves to immediate slaughter, and the mercy of the sword.”[[46]](#endnote-46)

A century later, another unexpected attack on British individuals eventually led to the formal assumption of the *diwani* of Bengal. The overnight imprisonment in a small cell of British prisoners in Calcutta (1756) – an event later known as the Black Hole – provided a platform for British aggression against Siraj-ud-Daula, and proof of his lack of fitness to rule. Intriguingly, accounts of the prisoners’ trials bear a striking resemblance to the almost hagiographic tones of the Protestant histories of 1641. One author even went so far as to describe the Calcutta cell as “a scene of the most cruel distress, which perhaps human nature ever suffered or survived.”[[47]](#endnote-47) That being said, accounts of the Black Hole differ significantly from their Irish counterparts in one respect. In Orme’s retelling, the British prisoners were driven to despair because of their impossible conditions, in which “all regards of compassion and affection were lost.”[[48]](#endnote-48) This extract is of interest because it summarises the perceived dangers of life in India: although the British faced significant physical perils, there also existed a far more troubling psychological danger. As mentioned previously, Chatterjee notes that fear played a major role in retellings of this episode. Examining the loss of what might be termed inherent ‘Britishness’ in Holwell’s original account, he rightly points out that Holwell’s primary concern was the lack of decorum exhibited by the captives, and not their imprisonment per se. In short, approached from this perspective, the loss of British dignity was problematic since it was witnessed by the nawab’s men, which subverted the hierarchical order envisioned by the British. Expanding on this matter, “Holwell’s tract is actually pedagogical, not accusatory. (…) What the Indians had seen of Europeans that night in Fort William had destroyed every claim of the civilizational superiority of white Christian nations.”[[49]](#endnote-49) By describing Britons turning against one another in a critical moment, Holwell and Orme both suggested that India had the ability to challenge British notions of unity. However, Chatterjee finally notes an added element that served to shift some of the blame back on the nawab’s men: the description of the jailers’ deliberate attempts to create rifts between the prisoners through their dispensation of water. The chaos that ensued, it is true, highlighted an unfortunate loss of British control. “For Holwell,” Chatterjee comments, “it was unforgivable that native eyes should have been allowed to witness the descent of a group of Europeans into a state of natural savagery. All he could do by way of retaliation was to transfer the attribute of ‘brutality’ from his benighted compatriots to the amused Indian prison guards.”[[50]](#endnote-50) It is within this context that Darcy’s notion of “re-colonisation” enters: it was necessary for the British in India to avenge the victims of the Black Hole, but the re-establishment of hierarchical norms also became essential. These retellings served as the reminder of a moment in which British strength and unity failed… as such, it could not be permitted to happen a second time. In contrast to accounts of the 1641 Rebellion, Holwell’s narrative is a prime example of the element of fear noted by Teltscher, and discussed above. Instead of rendering Indian actions the prime focus of the account, British decorum and civility are the main elements at stake. Stories of the Black Hole of Calcutta suggested disunity among the prisoners, but also suggested broader fears about India itself, and its impact on Britons.

The act of history writing was a powerful medium to convey political and ideological messages about the nature of British relations with its colonial possessions. Specific events were repeatedly memorialised throughout these histories and served as constant reminders of past colonial transgressions against Britons. The constant stress on the questionable credibility of appearances – as evinced by descriptions of the 1641 Rebellion – served as a harsh reminder that neither the Irish nor Indians could be trusted. *A complete history of the war in India* repeatedly suggested that there was a corrosive element in the Indian (but mostly Muslim) character. Contemporary historians gleefully recounted the supposed excesses of Siraj ud-Daula as validation for EIC participation in the *coup d’état* mounted against him.[[51]](#endnote-51)

The negative portrayal of individuals or events in Irish and Indian history invariably cast the British in a benevolent light, justifying their rise to power. By repeatedly drawing attention to centuries of Irish rebellions and the inhabitants’ uncivilised nature, British historians argued that the Irish should be grateful for the benefits of British influence. “*Prosper*,” Cox boldly averred, “had good reason to call *Ireland, the barbarous island*; and the Irish have as much reason to thank God and the English, for a more civil and regular government exercised over them.”[[52]](#endnote-52) However, Irish intransigence proved enduringly frustrating. Similar attitudes appeared in Indian histories as well, best exemplified through Grant’s conviction in the British mandate to “free” and “educate” the Indian population. Echoing Cox’s sentiments, he notably concluded that the people of Hindostan refused to entertain thoughts of reform and thereby halted the progress of civility.[[53]](#endnote-53)

These histories highlighted the proper forms of conduct invariably displayed by the British and rarely emulated by colonial subjects. As such, they became useful tools to oppose these subjects with their British counterparts. Religion was a key factor in this regard, acting as a marker of British distinction: increasingly, it became associated with identity in Ireland and India. While multiple Irish social categories persisted until 1798, communities gradually began to adhere to religious lines long before this. Similarly, the Indian histories gradually began to contrast the child-like Hindus with their violent rulers in the late eighteenth century.[[54]](#endnote-54) As such, Muslims became the counterparts of Catholics: ungovernable and treacherous regimes preying on innocent neighbours. The similar ways of considering Catholicism and Islam indicate that religion was an important point of comparison in colonial spheres throughout the early modern period. While this should not be interpreted as a suggestion that Catholicism and Islam were viewed as interchangeable, the depictions do suggest that the British adopted broader imperial attitudes that could be transposed onto different geographical and cultural spaces.

This article has compared early modern British-produced histories of Ireland and India to consider the continuities in historical practices throughout this period against the backdrop of changing socio-political and economic circumstances. The comparison of the histories of empire is a valuable exercise illustrating the parallel ways in which the British not only approached colonies regardless of regional context, but also reflected on these experiences. Thus, it demonstrates the evolution of, as well as connections within, imperial thought. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the British remained obsessed with colonial groups that attempted to subvert their authority, and the ways in which they recast these groups into comparable, and demonised, entities. Comparing specific areas such as Ireland and India illustrates how similar themes were invoked in different settings. There were admittedly substantial differences between the two contexts, particularly concerning the temporal span between the historical traditions. In addition, long-standing tensions between the Gaelic and the English/British lent a strong sense of religious and ethnic difference to the Irish conflict that was never as clearly articulated in accounts of India. Nonetheless, Britons did depict the Irish and Indians in noticeably comparable ways.

Consequently, this article builds on Colin Kidd’s argument regarding eighteenth-century attempts to seek out similarities with other societies through religion: given their domestic post-Reformation experiences of religious conflict, the British sought such differences in Ireland and India.[[55]](#endnote-55) Especially in the latter context, this opposition reflected an inability to imagine the peaceful coexistence of multiple religions in society. These histories allow historians to trace the evolution of the British Empire, from early English attempts to forge an Atlantic dominion to the contemporary accounts of the late eighteenth century, when Ireland and India became joint enterprises in the imperial project. Seen in this context, Irish and Indian histories represent a history of ideas in circulation, rather than context-specific products. Instead of contextualising the histories’ authors and audiences, this article places Ireland and India in a contextual relationship against one another. This exercise reveals similar projects and patterns of historical writing in both places, and the symmetrical terms in which these areas were conceived throughout the early modern period. These patterns, in turn, provide broader insights into the nature of colonialism, and notions of self and identity among the British. The article focuses on the triangular relations between Ireland, India, and Britain; not only individual relations between Britain and each colony, but also the flow of ideas between the two colonial sites, and their impact on Britain.

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2. Original emphasis. Nathaniel Crouch, *The history of the kingdom of Ireland* (London: Printed for Nath. Crouch, 1693), pp. 4 – 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Stephen Conway, *Britain, Ireland, and Continental Europe in the Eighteenth Century: Similarities, Connections, Identities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Thomas Bartlett, ‘“This Famous Island Set in a Virginian Sea”: Ireland in the British Empire, 1690 – 1801,’ in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume II. The Eighteenth Century*, ed. P.J. Marshall (5 Vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 253 – 275; Barry Crosbie, *Irish Imperial Networks: Migration, Social Communication and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, ed. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O’Connor (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It is worth noting that historians still debate the the nature of Ireland’s relation to Britain. This article adopts the position that Ireland can be considered a British colony within the framework of its depiction as a settler colony adhering to the Roman concept of *colonia* throughout the early modern period. Regarding Roman influences on early British colonial endeavours, and early Irish colonialism, see Nicholas Canny, ‘The Origins of Empire: An Introduction,’ in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume I. The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Nicholas Canny (5 Vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 1 – 33. For opposing views, see Julia Wright, *Ireland, India, and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 5, and Denis O’Hearn, ‘Ireland in the Atlantic Economy,’ in *Was Ireland a Colony? Economics, Politics and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Terrence McDonough (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), pp. 3 – 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
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6. Letter III, Luke Scrafton, *Reflections on the Government of Indostan: with a Short Sketch of the History of Bengal, from MDCCXXXVIII to MDCCLVI; and an Account of the English Affairs to MDCCLVIII* (London: Reprint by W. Strahan Jun. for G. Kearsley and T. Cadell, 1770), p. 120; Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (London: Longman, 1993); Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Kathleen Wilson, ‘Introduction: Histories, Empires, Modernities,’ in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660 – 1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 4, 11 – 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
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9. Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture 1500 – 1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 298, 395; Daniel Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 104, 126; Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 11, 231; Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 75; Paulina Kewes, ‘History and its Uses,’ in *The Uses of History in Early Modern England*, ed. Paulina Kewes (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2006), pp. 14, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
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