

Ireland and the Colonies

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When the Celts came to Ireland sometime in the latter half of the first millennium BC, they were surely not the first to settle on the island. As the Irish historian Donnchadh Ó Corráin emphasizes:

It must be remembered (...) that Ireland had highly developed and impressive cultures in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and the incoming Celts, who were never more than a dominant minority amongst a non-Celtic (...) majority, were heavily influenced by the societies which they found before them in Ireland.¹

But although they were neither the first nor the greatest in numbers, the Celts, or the Gaels as they would come to be known, are the most strongly remembered culture in Ireland.

This has mainly two reasons. For one, there is little we know about the cultures that went before them; none of these have left any written documents behind and thus little is stored in terms of memory. Almost everything we know about pre-Celtic cultures is based on archeological research. In contrast, the Celts were at the height of their might when Christianity came to Ireland in the fourth century AD, and with it the practice of writing. Not at least because of this, Gaelic, or, more specifically: Irish, became the main language on the island up until the 19th century. Consequently, in terms of storage memory, the Celts have a much stronger presence than their predecessors; *their* songs and legends were written down, even if it was someone else who was doing the writing. These stored memories could then be functionalized in times of need.

Once present in many parts of central and western Europe, in fact controlling much of it, most Celtic territory came to be occupied by the Roman Empire; Celtic culture survived mainly in Ireland, Wales and Scotland, which is sometimes, from an English perspective, referred to as the Celtic fringe. In the early centuries of the first millennium AD, when most of the British Isles was under Roman control, Ireland became a predominantly Celtic country, divided into several clan territories. When

the time would come, this heritage would be called upon to form the basis for a non-English, non-Anglo-Saxon Irish identity.

Most importantly, the political and ethnic difference to the English neighbors would come to be defined in religious terms, too. “An appropriate starting point for understanding modern Irish history is the fifth century,” writes historian Christine Kinealy consequently, “not merely because it coincides with the life of St Patrick, but also because it marks the appearance of written documents”.² St Patrick, today the patron saint of Ireland, came to the island from Britain as a Christian missionary and was later ordained as a Bishop; within a relatively short period of time, Christianity would come to influence most aspects of Irish life.³ The Christian church with its growing pan-European network (filling the void left by the demise of the Roman empire) became a central authority, epitomized by the many monasteries that were founded in Ireland during the time. Rather than opposing the Gaelic establishment, the missionaries formed strong links with the existent powers. Most Gaelic kings would adopt Christianity and eschew pre-Christian rituals; at the same time, Christians adopted Gaelic artforms, producing a “fusion of old Celtic art and new Christian values”.⁴

The Norman invasion that began under Henry II in 1169 marks the establishment of an English territorial claim to Ireland. In fact, it was the Irish kings themselves, who, embroiled in a dispute about supremacy within Ireland, “appealed for help to Henry II and changed the course of Irish history by doing so. The invitation inevitably became an invasion (...) which opened up Ireland politically to expansive Anglo-French feudalism”.⁵ The pope supported Henry II’s reign over Ireland, hoping it would strengthen the bond between the Irish church and Rome. Eventually, the King of England would also call himself the Lord of Ireland, and nearly three-quarters of the island (bar the remote Western parts) would come under Anglo-Norman dominion. In a way, this first of all created Ireland as an entity, which was drawn up between different clans before: “The English did not invade Ireland – rather, they seized a neighbouring island and invented the idea of Ireland”.⁶

The main purpose of the English claim to Ireland turned out to be the colonization of land:

The end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries saw the last decades of a medieval population

explosion in Europe which caused not only land-hunger and migration, but high food-prices and low labour costs. The sudden acquisition of large areas of underpopulated agricultural land in Ireland meant wealth for those who could develop its full potential.⁷

The English settlers did not only bring their language and culture with them, but a new economic system:

as long as the agricultural boom lasted, eastern Ireland changed from a subsistence to a market economy. The colonial manors (...) produced a surplus which was effectively collected and marketed through the network of little borough towns linked by trade to the provincial centres and ultimately through the seaports to England and the Continent.⁸

When economic conditions changed, though, many of the English landholders lost interest in their estates and moved back to England, and native Gaelic rulers won back many of the powers they had lost.

However, when Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic church in 1534 and established the reformed Church of England as the new national church, the relation between England and Ireland changed forever. In order to consolidate English rule, Henry declared himself King of Ireland, too; the majority of the non-reformed Christians in Ireland now found themselves in antagonism with the new state church which was answerable to royal control.⁹ In order to overcome resistance, English and Scottish Protestants were given land confiscated from unruly native Irish landowners in order to bring English language, law and religion to Ireland, bolstered by a strong military presence. The so-called 'plantation' scheme colonized the land once again and "resulted in a massive transfer of property from Irish to English ownership".¹⁰ Renting the land to the previous, now-dispossessed owners was guaranteeing a stable income to colonizers:

But, while aiming at long-term profits from their rents, like all British proprietors in Ireland they benefited enormously from the exploitation of the natural resources on their new estates. The most spectacular profits were derived from the felling and processing of timber, which found a ready market in England, the Netherlands, and further afield.¹¹

As it turned out, most of the Protestant plantations were in the northern province of Ulster (a stronghold of Gaelic resistance), while much of the South and the West remained Catholic:

Consequently, the gap between governed and governors became wider than before, and a new source of conflict, based on religious division, ensured that the gulf between natives and settlers would intensify.¹²

As we learned, anti-Catholic sentiment grew after the Gunpowder Plot at the beginning of the seventeenth century. After a last-ditch attempt to turn the tide failed, the Gaelic establishment fled the island in 1607. The creation of Protestant plantations in Ireland finally peaked during the Puritan Commonwealth, as did military action against recalcitrant Catholics. By the end of the 1650s, 40 percent of formerly Irish-owned land was English-owned, and about 40 percent of the Irish population had died of war-related causes – or had been deported as indentured laborers to Jamaica, a British colony since 1655, and the wider Caribbean.

The final defeat of any Gaelic Catholic hold over Ireland came when the dethroned James II lost his war over Ireland, symbolized by his defeat in 1690 in the Battle of the Boyne to the Protestant troops of William of Orange, the new king of England. By the end of the seventeenth century, only 14 percent of the land was still in Irish hands: “The vast majority of the population, however, were Catholic, landless and Gaelic speakers”.¹³ What we have, in effect, is a divided society: “Ireland at the outset of the eighteenth century was English and Protestant in appearance, but still predominantly Catholic in religion”.¹⁴

Throughout the eighteenth century, the Protestant minority, by virtue of being the main landowners, controlled the Irish parliament and ruled by strict Penal Laws which strongly favored the followers of the Anglican Church; the aim was not so much to eradicate, but to contain the Catholic presence in Irish life. By the late eighteenth century, however, “Irish society was subject to several hidden tensions”: a “population boom was threatening the stability of rural life; areas of domestic industry were vulnerable to economic fluctuations; and increasing resentment at taxation (...) had reactivated rural unrest”.¹⁵ The tension erupted in a nationalist-republican uprising in 1798, modelled after the American War of Independence and the French Revolution; it was, once again, brutally subdued. To quell any further unrest, the Acts of Union 1800 made

Ireland an official part of the new United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland – which meant that Ireland would subsequently be ruled from Westminster, the parliament now being the source of power in the constitutional monarchy that followed the so-called ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688/89.

The Union brought at least some stability to Ireland from which the Gaelic-Catholic minoritized majority benefited, too:

By 1845 Irish Catholics were in a stronger position than they had been for 200 years. While a large portion of the Catholic peasantry was poor and depended on a single crop, potatoes, for survival, the lifting of the Penal Laws in the late eighteenth century had allowed an economically strong Catholic middle class to emerge.¹⁶

The so-called ‘Great Famine’ (in Irish: *an gorta mór*), however, convinced most Irish that being part of the United Kingdom had little advantage to them. In 1845, an unknown blight destroyed about half of the potato crop:

In the winter of 1846 sharp increases in evictions, emigration (mainly to the US), disease and death were testimony that the government’s relief policies had not worked. (...) Within the space of six years, Ireland’s population fell by 25 per cent, making the Irish famine one of the most lethal in modern history.¹⁷

By 1900, Ireland’s population had diminished to 4 million, only half of what it was before the famine. And: “The tragedy of the famine occurred in the jurisdiction of the richest empire in the world and at the heart of the United Kingdom. It was a clear indication that the Act of Union had failed”.¹⁸ The industrial revolution which swept England and the continent during the nineteenth century had been restricted to the (mainly Protestant) north; the socio-economic situation of the (Catholic) minoritized majority remained dire.¹⁹

Throughout the nineteenth century, English culture and media created an image of the Irish which tried to put the blame for the economically backward position on the Irish themselves:

Victorian imperialists attributed to the Irish all those

emotions and impulses which a harsh mercantile code had led them to suppress in themselves. Thus if John Bull was industrious and reliable, Paddy was held to be indolent and contrary; if the former was mature and rational, the latter must be unstable and emotional; if the English were adult and manly, the Irish must be childish and feminine.²⁰

Whereas before the famine, Irish emphasis was on achieving the goal of 'home rule', that is, the reinstatement of the abolished parliament in Dublin that would show more awareness for Irish matters than the one in London, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a greater concentration on matters of culture. What came to be known as the Gaelic revival, or Irish renaissance, focused on representing Ireland as a region with a cultural heritage that was distinct, and ultimately irreconcilable with Britain. Such a distinct cultural identity should then form the basis for an independent Irish nation.

Such desire manifested itself in the foundation of various cultural institutions; now the hour had come to functionalize the stored memories of a Celtic past. After the establishment of the *Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language* (1877), the *Gaelic Athletic Association* (1884), and the *National Literary Society* (1892), Douglas Hyde and others founded the most influential of these organizations, the *Gaelic League* (1893), which supported the preservation and (re)learning of the Gaelic language; at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Gaelic League counted some 600 branches.

This new cultural nationalism culminated in an uprising on Easter 1916. While the occupation of the General Post Office by republican militias and the proclamation of an Irish Republic by poet-fighter Patrick Pearse was short-lived and easily subdued by the overwhelming military power of the British, the symbolism of the event and the subsequent execution of the rebel leaders strengthened an independent Irish we-identity. Not long after, the ratification of said declaration of independence by a breakaway Irish government in 1919 brought the start of the Irish War of Independence which ultimately led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the creation of the Irish Free State. This new state, however, did not cover the whole of the island. In the north, the Irish Republican Army encountered strong resistance; as a result, the island was partitioned, and Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom, albeit a minority on the island of Ireland.

After WWII, the south finally left the Commonwealth, of which the Free State was still a part, and became the Irish Republic; in 1973 it joined the European Community, later to become the EU. The north, however, remained contested terrain. The so-called ‘Troubles’ started with a call for emancipation from a Catholic minority that did not see its particular concerns and issues represented in a protestant-led and British-backed nation. What began as a fight for civil rights, however, soon descended into a guerilla war by various paramilitary organizations. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought a certain degree of peace; just how fragile the situation in Northern Ireland remains, however, and how tightly entangled the economies and communities of the two states on the island actually are, came to the fore throughout the British negotiations about the terms of leaving the European Union in 2020. In fact, discussions about the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol are still ongoing in 2023, and the fear of a hard border between the Republic and Northern Ireland is still felt.

While it is debatable whether Ireland can be called the first British ‘colony’, it was certainly not the last. The mixture of economic interest (in new land, new labor and new markets) and ideological justifications that was eventually met with political and cultural resistance played out again and again almost all around the globe – even though the specific circumstances produced a particular course of events in each instance. Great Britain was at the heart of this expansive movement: at the beginning of WWI in 1914, the British Empire comprised 20 percent of the world’s population!

In general, colonialism can be defined as a

relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority.²¹

While this definition indeed fits the Irish case quite well, it has to be modified in others.

Right at the time when the seventeenth-century plantation scheme in Ireland gathered pace, England also established its first colony overseas; a century later, Great Britain had colonies all along the east coast of North America, which gave home to English Puritans, Scottish and Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Catholics alike, and everyone else who dissented from the doctrines of the Church of England (and the policies of the Westminster parliament). While the Europeans were certainly a minority in the beginning, they eradicated the indigenous majority rather than subordinate and exploit it. Unlike in Ireland, where the English relied on the labor power of the native Irish, the overseas situation was different. The USA, much like Canada, Australia and New Zealand, saw what came to be known as settler colonialism: these people came to work and stay.

However, that doesn't mean that the British colonies in North America did not rely on the labor power of a subordinated people. This time, however, it wasn't an *indigenous* ethnically othered group that provided cheap labor, but an *imported* one: slaves from Africa. While many settlers did indeed work on the land they grabbed for themselves, the most prosperous enterprises were sustained by the Triangular Trade of the eighteenth century, “between Britain (manufacturing cheap industrial goods and weapons), Africa (providing slaves) and the New World colonies (producing plantation goods such as tobacco, cotton and sugar)”.²² The colonies Britain held in the West Indies (e.g. Jamaica, Bahamas, Bermuda) participated in this trade as well.

When the slave trade was abolished in the nineteenth century, and land that could be imagined as being uninhabited was no longer to be found, however, Britain returned to the tested Irish method of foreign rule:

It was neither plantation slavery nor white settlement, however, that became the dominant experience for the vast majority of Britain's globally dispersed colonial subjects. The conquest of India from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and the ‘Scramble for Africa’ during the 1880s and 90s brought hundreds of millions of people under British colonial control, many of whom continued to be governed by Maharajas and Nizams, Emirs and Paramount Chiefs.²³

Such ‘colonies of conquest’ could be managed by relatively few Europeans: “some 300 million Indians were ruled by no more than 125,000 British administrators, soldiers and traders”.²⁴ None of the

colonies under ‘indirect rule’, however, stayed under British dominion: India, for example, gained independence in 1947. None of the settler colonies, on the other hand, fell back into the hands of the indigenous populations: neither the ‘first nations’ of Canada, nor the ‘native Americans’ or the ‘aborigines’ of Australia were able to regain control over their land. In Ireland, some issues between settlers and natives still appear unresolved.

1. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, “Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland”, in: *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. Robert F. Foster, London: 1991, 1-52, here p. 1-3.
2. Christine Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland*, Stroud: 2008, p. 7.
3. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 18-19.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
5. Corráin, “Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland”, p. 52.
6. Declan Kiberd, “Anglo-Irish Attitudes”, in: *Ireland’s Field Day*, London: 1985, 83-105, here p. 83.
7. Katharine Simms, “The Norman Invasion and Gaelic Recovery”, in: *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. Robert F. Foster, London: 1991, 53-103, here p. 60.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 63-64.
9. Cf. Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 66-68.
10. Nicholas Canny, “Early Modern Ireland c.1500-1700”, in: *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. Robert F. Foster, London: 1991, 104-160, here p. 127.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
12. Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 70.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
14. Canny, “Early Modern Ireland c.1500-1700”, p. 153.
15. Robert F. Foster, “Ascendancy and Union”, in: *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, ed. Robert F. Foster, London: 1991, 161-212, here p. 177.
16. Kinealy, *A New History of Ireland*, p. 161.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
19. Cf. Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society 1848-1918*, Dublin: 1973, p. 173-175.
20. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London: 1995, p. 30.
21. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: a Theoretical Overview*, Princeton: 1997, 16-17.
22. Katja Sarkowsky & Frank Schulze-Engler, “The New Literatures in English”, in: *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds. Martin Middeke, Timo Müller, Christina Wald & Hubert Zapf, Stuttgart: 2012, 163-177, here p. 164.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
24. *Ibid.*

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