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Brief Introduction

The Irish Question is a phrase used to describe Irish nationalism and the calls for Irish independence. It encompasses problems of land ownership, religion and politics between Ireland and Britain. The reasons for the conflicting situation in Ireland in the 20th century are deep-rooted in history.

Norman Ireland (1168–1536)

Arrival of the Normans

By the 12th century, Ireland was divided politically into various kingdoms. Power was exercised by the heads of a few regional dynasties competing against each other for supremacy over the whole island. One of these men, King Diarmait of Leinster, who had been exiled, obtained permission from Henry II of England to recruit Norman knights to regain his kingdom. The first Norman knight landed in Ireland in 1167. Several counties were restored to the control of Diarmait, who named the Norman Richard de Clare heir to his kingdom. King Henry, who feared the establishment of a rival Norman state in Ireland, resolved to impose his authority. Therefore, he landed with a large fleet at Waterford in 1171, becoming the first King of England to set foot on Irish soil. Henry awarded his Irish territories to his younger son John with the title of “Lord of Ireland”. When John unexpectedly succeeded his brother as King John of England, the “Lordship of Ireland” fell directly under the English Crown.

Lordship of Ireland

Between the 12th and 13th century, Anglo-Norman barons from England invaded Ireland and set up colonies in the east, involving the east coast from Waterford to eastern Ulster and a considerable distance inland as well. They introduced feudalism and forced the native Irish to become slaves. The counties were ruled by many smaller kings. Throughout the 13th century the policy of the English Kings was to weaken the power of the Norman Lords in Ireland.

Gaelic resurgence and Norman decline

The Black Death arrived in Ireland in 1348. Because most of the English and Norman inhabitants of Ireland lived in towns and villages, the plague hit them far harder than it did the native Irish, who lived in more dispersed rural

\(^1\) to encompass: to include
\(^2\) deep-rooted: radicato
\(^3\) fleet: group of ships
settlements. After it passed, Gaelic Irish language and customs came to dominate the country again. The English-controlled territory shrank\textsuperscript{4} to a fortified area around Dublin (the Pale), and had little real authority outside (beyond the Pale).

By the end of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, central English authority in Ireland had almost disappeared. The Lordship of Ireland lay in the hands of the King of Kildare, who dominated the country by means of military force and alliances with Irish lords and clans. With the introduction of Poyning's Law in 1494, the Dublin government was put under the control of the Westminster Parliament.

\section*{Early modern Ireland (1536–1691)}

\subsection*{Conquest and rebellion}

From 1536, Henry VIII decided to conquer Ireland and bring it under crown control. In 1541, he upgraded Ireland from a lordship to a full Kingdom. Henry was proclaimed King of Ireland at a meeting of the Irish Parliament that year. This was the first meeting of the Irish Parliament to be attended by the Gaelic Irish chieftains as well as the Norman aristocracy. With the institution of government in place, the next step was to extend the control of the English Kingdom of Ireland over all of its claimed territory. This took nearly a century.

The re-conquest was completed during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I, after several brutal conflicts. After this point, the English authorities in Dublin established a centralised government and successfully disarmed the native lordships. However, the English were not successful in converting the Catholic Irish to the Protestant religion and the brutal methods used by crown authority to bring the country under English control heightened\textsuperscript{5} resentment of English rule.

From the mid-16\textsuperscript{th} to the early 17\textsuperscript{th} century, crown governments carried out a policy of land confiscation and colonisation, known as “Plantations”. English Protestant colonists were sent to the provinces of Munster and Ulster. These Protestant settlers replaced the Irish Catholic landowners who were removed from their lands, forming the ruling class in Ireland. Several Penal Laws, aimed at Catholics, were introduced to encourage conversion to the established Anglican Church of Ireland.

\subsection*{Wars and penal laws}

The 17\textsuperscript{th} century was perhaps the bloodiest in Ireland’s history. Ireland was convulsed\textsuperscript{6} by eleven years of warfare, beginning with the Rebellion of 1641, when Irish Catholics rebelled against the domination of English and Protestant settlers. The Catholic gentry briefly ruled the country as Confederate Ireland (1642–1649) until Oliver Cromwell, an English military and political leader,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{4} to shrink: to become smaller
  \item \textsuperscript{5} to heighten: to intensify
  \item \textsuperscript{6} to be convulsed: to be shaken violently
\end{itemize}
re-conquered Ireland in 1653 on behalf of the English Commonwealth (the republic which ruled first England, and then Ireland and Scotland). Cromwell’s conquest was the most brutal phase of the war. By its close, up to a third of Ireland’s population was dead or in exile. The better-quality remaining lands owned by Irish Catholics were confiscated and given to British settlers. Several hundred remaining native landowners were transplanted to Connacht, in the northwest of Ireland.

Ireland became the main battleground after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when the Catholic James II left London and the English Parliament replaced him with William of Orange. The wealthier Irish Catholics supported James to try to reverse the Penal Laws and land confiscations, whereas Protestants supported William to preserve their properties in the country. James and William fought for the Kingdom of Ireland and James’ forces were defeated. It was in that period that the Irish Protestants became known as “Orangemen”.

Slavery

From the 15th to the 18th century, Irish prisoners were sold as slaves. For centuries, the Irish were dehumanised by the English, described as savages, so making their murder and displacement appear all the more justified.

Protestant ascendancy (1691–1801)

Catholic resistance in Ireland ended in 1691 and the Penal Laws were reinforced. Consequent Irish antagonism towards England was aggravated by the economic situation of Ireland in the 18th century. Firstly, some absentee landlords managed their estates inefficiently, and food tended to be produced for export rather than for domestic consumption. Secondly, two very cold winters led directly to a famine between 1740 and 1741, which killed about 400,000 people and caused over 150,000 Irish to leave the island. Lastly, Ireland was forbidden to produce goods or raw materials that would compete with similar British ones.

Therefore, in the course of the century there were uprisings against England and campaigns for Irish independence and France offered military help. The English Prime Minister Pitt feared that if he

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7 on behalf of: as representative of
8 to be transplanted: to be relocated
9 to be dehumanised: to be divested of human qualities
10 absentee landlord: a person who owns and rents out a profit-earning property, but does not live within the property's local economic region
had granted independence to Ireland the country might have been used as a base for attacks on Britain and managed to persuade the Irish Parliament to agree to its own abolition.

By the late 18th century, many of the Anglo-Irish ruling class had come to see Ireland as their native country and agitated for greater legislative independence for the Irish Parliament. The uprisings culminated in the Irish Rebellion of 1798, which was bloodily suppressed.

**Union with Great Britain (1801–1912)**

In 1800, the British and the Irish parliaments enacted the Acts of Union. The merger created a new political entity called United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland with effect from 1st January 1801. The Anglican Church became the official Irish Church and Catholics were not allowed to sit in Parliament, even if 88% of the Irish were Catholic.

In 1823 a Catholic lawyer, Daniel O’Connell, known in Ireland as “The Liberator”, began an ultimately successful Irish campaign to achieve emancipation, and to be seated in the Parliament. This culminated in O’Connell’s successful election. In 1829 the Parliament gave Catholics the right to vote.

In the 1840s, the failure of the potato crop, that represented the most important food in Irish peasants’ diet, resulted in the Irish famine. Over 1 million people died of hunger and in the following years millions more emigrated to North America and England to escape from poverty and starvation. Gaelic, once the island’s spoken language, declined in use in the 19th century as a result of the famine and the creation of the National School education system and it was largely replaced by English. Bitterness and resentment against English were strong and produced the Fenian Irish Independence Movement, a secret revolutionary society founded in 1858. A series of violent rebellions took place although they all failed.

The late 19th century also witnessed major land reform. In 1903, it was approved the Wyndham Land Purchase Act, that set the conditions for the breakup of large estates and gradually devolved to rural landholders. It effectively ended the era of the absentee landlords, finally resolving the Irish Land Question. In the 1870s the issue of Irish self-government again became a major focus. However, two attempts to pass Home Rule were unsuccessful. The debate over Home Rule led to tensions between Irish nationalists and Irish unionists (those who favoured maintenance of the Union). Most of the island was predominantly nationalist, Catholic and agrarian. The northeast, however, was predominantly unionist, Protestant and industrialised. Unionists feared a loss of political power and economic wealth in a predominantly rural, nationalist, Catholic home-rule state. Nationalists believed they would remain economically and politically second-class citizens without self-government.

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11 to enact: to make a proposal into a law
12 to witness: assistere
13 estate: large property
Home Rule, Easter Rising and War of Independence (1912–1922)

A new party, called Sinn Fein (meaning “Ourselves Alone”), was founded in 1905 and aimed at creating an Irish Republic, independent from the political and economic point of view.

In September 1914, just as the World War I broke out, the UK Parliament passed the Third Home Rule Act to turn the Home Rule Bill of 1912 into an effective law, but it was suspended for the duration of the war. In order to ensure implementation of Home Rule after the war, most nationalist leaders supported Ireland’s participation to war aligning themselves with\(^{14}\) the Triple Entente.

The period 1916–1921 was marked by political violence and upheaval\(^{15}\). Although it was agreed that the hostilities between Catholics and Protestants should be suspended, on Easter Monday of April 1916, a group of extreme nationalists, members of Sinn Fein attempted to seize power in Dublin. The uprising (called “Easter Rising”) was repressed by the British Army (over 450 people died and 3,000 were wounded) and the rebels were executed. The Easter Rising is strongly remembered and celebrated in Ireland by the Catholic nationalist community.

With the end of the war the Irish question rose again. Sinn Fein was not content with the Home Rule and started a new series of protests against the British refusing to send members to Parliament in Westminster. After the 1918 general election, the 69 Sinn Fein MPs declared themselves the elected assembly of the Irish people. The nationalists started organising their own army, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which mostly used guerrilla tactics. On the opposite side there were the Protestant Unionists (mainly from Northern Ireland) who wished to remain part of the UK, fearing that Home Rule would in the end allow the Catholics to take control of all Ireland. The Irish Republican Army waged\(^{16}\) a guerilla war (the Irish War of Independence) from 1919 to 1921.

In 1920 English Parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act, establishing separate domestic legislatures for the north and south, as well as continued representation in British Parliament. The six northern counties of Ireland accepted the act and became the Northern Ireland, which still belonged to the United Kingdom. There, the population was mostly Protestant and was given limited Home Rule and a separate Parliament in Belfast. The 26 southern counties refused to accept the legislation. In 1921, with the Anglo-Irish Treaty, they became the Irish Free State, which governed itself but stayed under British rule.

Eire and Northern Ireland (1922–present)

Free State and Republic

The treaty divided the republican movement into anti-Treaty, who wanted to fight on until an Irish Republic was achieved, and pro-Treaty supporters, who accepted the Free State as a first step.

\(^{14}\) to align yourself with: schierarsi con

\(^{15}\) upheaval: sconvolgimento

\(^{16}\) to wage: intraprendere una campagna militare
towards full independence and unity. Between 1922 and 1923 both sides fought the bloody Irish Civil War. The new Irish Free State government defeated the anti-Treaty remnant of the Irish Republican Army, imposing multiple executions.

In 1927 Sinn Fein ended as a movement, but some intransigent members join the IRA, and Sinn Fein became the political arm of the Irish Revolutionary Army. The new Irish Free State (1922–37) remained a democracy in contrast with many contemporary European states. Testament to this came when the losing faction in the Irish Civil War was able to take power peacefully by winning the 1932 general election signalling the final acceptance of the Free State on their part.

With the partition of Ireland in 1922, 92.6% of the Free State’s population were Catholic while 7.4% were Protestant. Many Protestants left the country in the early 1920s, above all because they felt unwelcome in a predominantly Catholic and nationalist state. Fortunately, from 1945, Protestants became less likely to emigrate, indicating their integration into the life of the Irish State.

In 1937 a new Constitution was passed and the Free State was renamed Eire, the Gaelic name for Ireland. The state remained neutral throughout World War II, although tens of thousands volunteered to serve in the British forces. In 1949 Ireland broke the final link with Britain Commonwealth and became an independent republic.

Northern Ireland

While Eire was steadily and effectively working towards economic development, the situation in Northern Ireland remained critical. Here two-thirds of the population were Protestants, and by the mid-1960s a clear Protestants dominance over the Catholic minority had been established: the Protestants received better jobs and better housing, and the Catholics felt discriminated again. The Protestants were afraid that the reunion of two parts of Ireland would place themselves at the mercy of the Catholics, who were the overall majority in the island, and were determined to keep Northern Ireland part of the United Kingdom. In the early 1970s unemployment among Catholics in Northern Ireland was 17%, while it was 7% for Protestants. Moreover, electoral districts were arranged so as to give Protestants a majority on the council. Catholics also felt that the mostly (97%) Protestant police force – RUC, or Royal Ulster Constabulary – were not impartial, and felt deprived of full civil rights.

In 1968 Catholics in the North began to complain about discrimination by the Unionist government. They formed a Civil Rights Association and held civil rights marches to demand equal treatment over jobs, housing and voting rights. Between 1968 and 1969, their marches disorder grew especially in Londonderry and Belfast, and the RUC often failed to protect the Catholics. This enabled the IRA to gain supporters. Police stations were attacked, and in August 1969 the British army had to intervene to restore order but failed to stop the attacks against the soldiers sided with the Protestants.

17 steadily: constantly
Meanwhile, the IRA split into two wings, the Provisionals and the Officials. While the Officials were in favour of peaceful solution to the problems, to be achieved through elections, the Provisionals declared war on Britain and set up a campaign of violence and bombings both in Ireland and in Britain. The relations between the army and the Catholic population became increasingly tense, and violence on both sides continued.

The British government responded robustly; the Provisionals, who were all Catholics, were condemned as terrorists and criminals, and interned in high-security prisons. This policy caused a wave of resentment, and the attitude of the IRA hardened, especially when, on 30th January 1972, thirteen Catholic civilians were killed by British soldiers in Londonderry. This event is known as the “Bloody Sunday”. The Protestants immediately formed their own terrorist organizations, like the UDA (Ulster Defence Association) and the UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters). The British government took over direct control of Northern Ireland in 1972, but this did not stop the wave of violence. As a matter of fact, the IRA carried out a bombing campaign in Britain. In 1974, for example, an explosion in a Birmingham pub killed 21 innocent people; a car bomb in Hyde Park killed two Horseguardsmen in 1982, and one year later a car bomb outside Harrods, in London, killed 6 people. In 1984 the IRA attempted to blow up Mrs Thatcher and her Cabinet at the Grand Hotel in Brighton. In 1993 an IRA bomb exploded in the City of London causing great damage. To these must be added the thousands of people, civilians and soldiers, killed in Northern Ireland, where retaliation seemed to be the standard reaction (Catholics were often tortured and murdered by Protestant extremists).

Years of horrific terrorism followed but there began to be increased co-operation between the British and the Irish governments in the search for a solution. Eventually, in 1985 the Anglo-Irish Agreement, aimed at helping to bring an end terrorism in Northern Ireland by improving security along the border, was signed. An important step towards self-determination of Northern Ireland was made through an agreement between Britain and Ireland signed in 1993, and in 1998 greater autonomy was granted to both Catholics and Protestants in Ulster (Good Friday Agreement). In 1994 Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, announced a cease-fire. However, this did not stop violence and terrorist attacks by both the IRA and Protestant terrorist groups. Even today, relations between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland are extremely uneasy.

Despite the Good Friday agreement, the IRA had not yet disarmed. In the early 2005, IRA renounced the use of violence in its fight against British rule in Northern Ireland. The group promised to disarm, and to use only peaceful means in its ongoing efforts. The announcement was widely hailed. Nevertheless, in 2009, the IRA started to carry out its violent campaigns again. In 2011, it even threatened to plan other armed struggles against Britain.

\[18\] to blow up: to destroy something or to kill someone by an explosion
\[19\] retaliation: ritorsione
\[20\] ongoing: continuing
Modern Ireland

Economy

Global economic problems in the 1970s, augmented by a set of misjudged economic policies followed by governments, caused the Irish economy to stagnate. The Troubles in Northern Ireland discouraged foreign investment. Devaluation was enabled when the Irish Pound, or Punt, was established as a separate currency in 1979, breaking the link with the UK’s sterling. However, economic reforms in the late 1980s, helped by investment from the European Community, led to the emergence of one of the world’s highest economic growth rates, with mass immigration (particularly of people from Asia and Eastern Europe) as a feature of the late 1990s and increase of GDP per capita. This economy came to be known as the Celtic Tiger, comparing it to the fast-growing “tiger” economy of Asian countries. The economy continued to grow until 2008, when it fell into recession. As a matter of fact, also because of the global crisis, the GDP contracted by 14% and unemployment levels rose from 4.5% to 14%.

Religion

The Catholic Church had a powerful influence over the Irish state for much of its history. The clergy’s influence meant that the Irish state had very conservative social policies, forbidding, for example, divorce, contraception, abortion, pornography as well as encouraging the censoring and banning of many books and films. In addition the Church largely controlled the State’s hospitals, schools and remained the largest provider of many other social services. Nowadays, the power of the Catholic Church has been much reduced. As a matter of fact, in the last years, divorce has been legalised, homosexuality decriminalised, and abortion in limited cases allowed by the Irish Supreme Court. Modern Ireland’s detachment of the Church from ordinary life can be explained by the increasing disinterest in Church doctrine by younger generations and the questionable morality of the Church’s representative. In 2011 Ireland closed its embassy at the Vatican, an apparent result of this growing trend.

Flags in Ireland

The national flag of Ireland is a tricolour of green, white and orange. This flag, which bears the colours green for Catholics, orange for Protestants, and white for the desired peace between them, dates to mid-19th century.

The only official flag representing Northern Ireland is the Union Flag of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
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