

From Oppression to Nationalism: The Irish Penal Laws of 1695

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English 484

Ireland had stood in the shadows of the great powers of Britain for centuries. From the reign of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I thereafter, to the invasion by Oliver Cromwell, Britain's puppetry over Ireland had continued to dehumanize the Irish peoples. The Irish Penal Laws of 1695 intensified the injustice brought upon by the Protestant English, wherein they stripped the Catholic Irish of religious freedoms and nearly all of their holdings including land. Various rules were created to suppress the Catholics in order to make sure they did not rise above the British power as they attempted in the Williamite Rebellion in 1688 (Franks n.p.) While the enforcement of the Penal Laws resulted in poverty across the Irish state and consequently lead to emigration, it also created a sense of unity amongst those who remained in Ireland, and introduced the concept of nationalism. "A Modest Proposal," written in 1729 by Anglo-Irish writer Jonathan Swift, emphasized Ireland's destruction using satire, and highlighted the injustice casted upon the Irish through prose.

Having been born fatherless into an Anglo-Irish family, Jonathan Swift moved back and forth between Britain and Ireland. Swift often accompanied his mother to England when in search for work, until eventually he was passed over to his uncle, who lived in Ireland (Simon). There, he attended the Kilkenny Grammar School, known as the best school in Ireland at the time, and later enrolled in Trinity College (Simon). Written in the perspective of a Protestant Englishman, "A Modest Proposal" satirizes careful arguments on ways to manage poverty in Ireland through statistical, social, and mathematical calculations; this emphasizes Swift's resentment of British policies against the Irish. In his writing, Swift portrays Ireland in "distress," which perfectly describes its state in the 18th century.

According to the video narrative "Ireland and the Penal Laws" by Maurice Franks, any practice of Catholicism and communication in the Gaelic language was forbidden and labelled as rebellious against the powers of Britain. Catholic priests were banished, Catholic schools were banned, and Catholics were forced to pay a tithe to upkeep the Anglican church. Brave teachers who continued to teach their students their religious beliefs in the Gaelic tongue did so in remote areas, hidden and away from the Protestant English. Suppressing the religious and linguistic practices of the Irish Catholics were a few of Britain's many strategies that contributed to the weakening of Ireland as a whole (Franks).

Under the Penal Laws, the Catholics could not hold commission in the army, enter a profession, or own a horse worth more than five pounds. Catholics could not possess weaponry and arms, could not study law or medicine, and could not speak or read Gaelic or play Irish music (*The Penal Laws*). The most impactful rules to the Irish, however, were the rules surrounding the ownership of land. The Popery Act of 1703, passed by the British parliament, forbade the Catholics to pass down their land to their eldest son, and instead required landowners to distribute the land equally amongst all sons. Moreover, if the family bore only daughters, the land were to be also split equally amongst the daughters (Harvey 56). As a result, by the end of 1703, Irish Catholics who made up 90% of Ireland's population owned less than 10% of the land (*The Penal Laws*). According to Karen Harvey of Pennsylvania State University, "Incentives were offered to promote conversions to the Protestant faith; a Catholic eldest son was allowed full inheritance rights if he changed his religion; younger sons, upon conversion, could claim a portion of an estate." Therefore, land became a tool used to bribe the Irish Catholics to convert to Protestantism.

In the 18th century, land ownership served as a symbol for social, economic, and political power. It represented security, community, and was a crucial factor in the establishment of Irish identity. In "The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism," writer and historian Robert Kee addresses Swift's statement regarding the Protestant landlords in Ireland:

'By unmeasurable screwing and racking their rents all over the kingdom, have already reduced the poor people to a worse condition than the peasants in France, or the vassals in Germany or Poland. 'Whoever travels this country,' he declared, 'and observes the face of nature, or the faces and habits and dwellings of the natives will hardly think himself in a land where law, religion, or common humanity is professed.' (Kee)

Leases were offered by the Protestant English landlords, but they were to be kept no more than 31 years, and if the land produced more than a third of the price of the rent in profit, the land could then be confiscated from the Catholics (Harvey 57). Some Irish Catholics converted to Protestantism just so they could maintain the land that had been passed down for generations, in which case the British had claimed their victory in luring the Catholics into their religious beliefs. Ireland slowly but surely became the center of poverty, as Swift describes in his satiric prose, "It is a melancholy Object to those, who walk through this great Town, or travel in the Country, when they see the *Streets*, the *Roads*, and *Cabbin-Doors*, crowded with *Beggars* of the female Sex, followed by three, four, or six Children, all in *Rags*, and importuning every Passenger for an Alms." It was not until 1782, approximately 80 years after the Popery Act

was first enforced, that the freedom to purchase land was granted to the Irish Catholics (Harvey 58).

Observing the decline of the Irish state, Jonathan Swift illuminates the severity of depression of Ireland through "A Modest Proposal" by suggesting the people of Ireland to begin breeding children for consumption and leather. Since his work was submitted anonymously, Swift was able to prove the injustice of the Penal Laws through satire. The "scheme" that Swift proposes would supposedly lead to the decrease in the "number of Papists." Tenants would be able to make their own money to support themselves despite the rent they pay to their landlords, increase the "Nation's Stock," bring "*Custom to Taverns*," and improve the economy by exporting the flesh and skin of young children. By incorporating the term "Papist" to refer to the members of the Roman Catholic Church, Swift maintains the vulgarity of his proposal to further exaggerate the absurdity of the religious battle. The Protestants had deliberately humiliated the Irish Catholics, and wiped out what little power that remained- power that had been gradually reduced since the reign of Charles I and under the command of Oliver Cromwell.

In 1649, Oliver Cromwell, the head of the British army, was sent to Ireland to suppress the forces of the royalists ("Ireland and Scotland"). According to John Walsh, after the beheading of Charles I of England, the Irish Roman Catholics in support of monarchy hoped for his son to be installed as Charles II. In addition to backing the temporarily abolished system, the people of Ireland hoped for reciprocation from Charles II for the support they gave, in the form of religious freedom amongst the Irish people (Walsh). The increase in Protestant settlers in the 17th century Ireland had sparked tension between them and the Catholic Irish, eventually leading to a rebellion against the Protestant population in 1641 ("Ireland and Scotland"). Thousands of Protestants were murdered in the battle, consequently resulting in Cromwell's attack eight years later. Cromwell, who believed God had reached out to him directly about the fate of the Irish once stated, "I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgement of God upon these barbarous wretches, who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood" (Fraser 338). During the short period of nine months, Cromwell's army left behind a pool of blood on Irish land, proving Protestant England's dominance over Catholic Ireland (Walsh).

The tension between the Catholics and the Protestants continued throughout the century, resulting in the Jacobite Rebellion in Scotland in 1680 and the Williamite War in Ireland in 1689 between the Jacobites (supporters of King James II) and the Williamites (supporters of the Dutch Protestant Prince William of Orange). After a year of bloodshed, the Williamite army claimed their victory, crowning Prince William as King of England and eliminating James II, thus reviving Protestant England (Heritage Academy History n.p.)

Within the religious conflict, Patrick Sarsfield, Earl of Lucan acted as a negotiator for Ireland, and formed a compromise through the Treaty of Limerick. Under the military article of the treaty, the Jacobites were allowed to leave for France with their families, an act now known as the Flight of the Wild Geese ("The Treaty of Limerick"). Others, if chose to do so, had the option of fighting for the Williamite army. According to Sir Henry Parnell, the civil article of the treaty on the other hand, stated:

The Roman Catholics of this kingdom shall enjoy such privileges in the exercise of their religion as are consistent with the laws of Ireland, or as they did enjoy in the reign of King Charles the second: and their majesties, as soon as their affairs will permit them to summon a parliament in this kingdom, will endeavour to procure the said Roman Catholics such further security in that particular, as may preserve them from any disturbance upon the account of their said religion. (190)

The Irish Catholics were granted the freedom of practicing their own religion as long as they followed King William III's rule. At such point, the Catholics and Protestants shared a certain level of peace, unlike Ireland under the Penal Laws several decades later.

Later in the 18th century, Primate Hugh Boulter wrote to the Duke of Newcastle about the state of Ireland in horror, "Since I came here in the year 1725, there was almost a famine among the poor; thousands of families quitted their habitations to seek bread elsewhere, and many hundreds perished." Later in 1728 he wrote, "I am sorry I am obliged to give your grace so melancholy an account of the state of the kingdom, as I shall in this letter" (Parnell 98). One of the major effects of the Penal Laws were emigration from the Irish land. Many Irish Catholics, as well as Protestants, fled Ireland in search of a better life elsewhere, often to other areas of Europe such as England, Wales, Scotland, or to the Americas. Swift also states in his introductory paragraph of "A Modest Proposal" that the poor mothers are "forced to employ all their time in Stroling, to beg Sustenance for their *helpless Infants*... or leave their *dear native Country to fight for the Pretender of Spain*, or sell themselves to the *Barbadoes*" (Swift).

According to Robert E. Kennedy in *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage, and Fertility*, the Americas were a more common destination for the Protestants rather than the Catholics, considering the expensive transatlantic voyage (22). Many Irish Catholics emigrated to areas within close proximity, but often stayed only until they attained enough money to travel to the United States (U.S.) (22). Once emigrating to the U.S., the Irish fought for independence with the colonies present, and by 1776, approximately one-sixth of the population in the U.S. was comprised of Irish people (21). The effects of

the Penal Laws had been impactful to the point where it physically and psychologically drained the Irish Catholics, and consequently drove them out of their native land.

Although the majority of the Catholic Irish fled Ireland, those who remained slowly gained a sense of unity amongst each other. Consequently, a new found wave of Irish nationalism was formed—a wave that carried on for centuries thereafter, influencing various Irish writers such as John McCormack and William Butler Yeats.

John McCormack's song *The Wearin' o' the Green* (c. 1798) expresses the immediate response of the Catholic Irish against the Protestant English:

An' if the colour we must wear is England's cruel red,
Let it remind us of the blood that Ireland has shed;
Then pull the shamrock from your hat, and throw it on the sod,
An' never fear, 'twill take root there, though under foot 'tis trod. (Regan 176)

Despite the lives lost in the physical and psychological war against Britain, the Irish stood tall and proud of their nation. The first two lines depict a rebellious image, convincing the Irish crowd to remember who they are and the suffering that the British brought upon them. The pain that the Irish experienced, in other words, became the center of Irish unity and pride.

The Irish continued to fight for their freedom all throughout the 19th and 20th century, rebelling against the British powers in various uprisings. Reflecting upon the Easter uprising of 1916, W.B. Yeats expresses:

Now and in time to be,
Where the green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (Regan 349)

Using the Irish color green, Yeats foresees the future, illuminating an image of Ireland, rising above Britain. The juxtaposing words, "terrible" and "beauty," contrasts the angelic image of Ireland against the angry and vengeful members of the nation.

Although the Irish Penal Laws were abolished in the late 18th century, the effects had carried on for centuries thereafter. Swift's heavy satire in "A Modest Proposal" expresses just how detrimental the effects were on the Catholic Irish. While some sacrificed their identity to seek a better life elsewhere, others gathered as one to rebel against Britain's oppressive forces, finding unity along the journey. Ireland's national pride carried forth, strengthening with each and every failure against the powers of Britain. The weight of the Irish Penal Laws had forced a sinking ship to reach the depths of the ocean floor, but failed to rid the sailors of their pride,

integrity, and dedication to their beliefs. With power invested towards freedom and independence, the people of Ireland sailed their ship throughout the sea, building a powerful nation along the journey.

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