

Ireland in the 18th Century

After 1691, the English and Irish parliaments passed Acts designed to limit the rights of the Irish catholic population and ensure the dominance of the Ascendancy (the protestant Anglo-Irish who belonged to the established Church of Ireland). There was a clear injustice against Catholics that ranged between civil disabilities to commercial discrimination that aimed at limiting and controlling the Irish economy.

1. The Penal Laws

- Catholics were excluded from the Dublin parliament, the legal profession and the judiciary.
- Catholics buying, leasing or inheriting lands were subject to legal constraints.
- They were forbidden from owning firearms or a horse for military purposes.
- They were prohibited from teaching and from pursuing their studies abroad.
- Catholic priesthood was strictly controlled, and some penal legislation was also directed against the dissenting Ulster Presbyterians.

After all, the effect of the laws was to reduce the amount of land in Catholic ownership to less than 10% by the 1770s. However, there was no mass desertion from the old faith and old ways of life were kept alive by the clandestine Roman clergy and the illegal "hedge schools" (unofficial schools that afforded primary education to Catholics and Presbyterians).

2. The Commercial Code:

- Irish cattle trade was curtailed by the English parliament of Charles II.
- In 1699, Irish wool merchants were forced to export their entire output to England, subject to crippling tariffs.
- The commercial code ensured that forestry and agriculture were the prime industries of 18th century Ireland.
- By the 1760s, Ireland was the major exporter of salted beef and butter and supplier to the British armed forces and settlers in the colonies.

As a result of such legal and commercial discrimination, the Irish people resisted union with Great Britain:

1. Grattan and the Irish Volunteers

Henry Grattan was an Irish protestant patriot and MP of the Irish parliament who argued for the legislative freedom of all his countrymen. Volunteer militias were formed of all Irish religious groups to defend the Island from the French and called for free and fair trade between Ireland and England. Grattan benefited from this wave of national feeling as well as the crisis of the American Revolution to push the Westminster parliament to abolish the commercial code in 1780 and by 1782, the Irish/Dublin parliament was given the power to enact legislation without scrutiny by Westminster.

2. Ireland and the French Revolution

Ireland was a fertile soil for the ideals of the French revolution:

- In 1792, the United Irishmen were founded by the founder of the Republican Party Wolfe Tone with a number of Belfast linen merchants, to secure a reformed constitution that would guarantee the rights of the Irishmen.
- 1798, a rebellion sparked where Wolfe died and it was easily crushed.
- Catholic opinion was persuaded to support the Union Bill by the promise of Catholic emancipation.
- Abolition of the Irish parliament in 1800.
- Ireland was united with Great Britain in 1801.
- 100 Irish MPs, 28 peers and 4 bishops sat in the parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.