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THE 1798 REBELLION IN IRELAND

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1. Background to the rebellion

The last decade of the 1700s was a most important time in Irish history. Republicanism and Loyalism both found real identity, the Orange Order and Maynooth College were both founded as the century ended with the rebellion in Ireland and the subsequent Act of Union. The repercussions of these events define Irish history even up to the modern day.

The rebels were very influenced by the effects of uprisings in America, France and Australia. They seized the opportunity to try to create a society not based on religion but based on democratic principles and freedom of expression. This policy was to prove popular with Irish people of different creeds who all wanted the same thing, freedom from English rule.

This philosophy was to provide a means whereby counter-revolutionaries could try to disrupt the organisation by inciting sectarian hatreds and fears within the movement.

Protestant ascendancy

The social and political systems in Ireland in the 1790s was such that the vast majority of the population of over 5 million people were excluded. Only the ruling Protestant class, comprising of about 10% of the population, were entitled to vote or to sit in parliament. The vast majority of the land in Ireland was owned by Church of Ireland emigrants from England. Ireland was independent in theory but in practice it was ruled by the English parliament who severely restricted the growth of the Irish economy. The Presbyterian class were also excluded and many emigrated to America to seek out a more favourable situation.

The effects of worldwide revolution

It is not surprising, therefore, that when the American colonists revolted against British government in the 1770s, they found a sympathetic ear amongst their kin in Ireland. In 1778 France, Britain's traditional enemy, entered the war on the American side, thus threatening Ireland with invasion. The British government was caught without an army to defend Ireland, since its regular troops had been sent to America, nor the revenue to raise an alternative, due to the economic dislocation caused by the war. An Irish Protestant army, the Volunteers, was raised to fill the breach, financed locally. Unfortunately for government it became the focus for various grievances, both political and economic. A convention of Ulster Volunteers (predominantly Presbyterian) at Dungannon in 1782 demanded parliamentary reform (a broadening of the franchise and the abolition of 'rotten' boroughs) and Catholic emancipation (the abolition of remaining anti-Catholic laws). However a national Volunteer convention the following year split on the Catholic question and Volunteering declined thereafter.

The United Irishmen and the Catholic Convention

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 with its ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity provided fresh impetus to the reform movement in Ireland. In the autumn of 1791 Societies of United Irishmen were founded in Belfast and Dublin with the twin aims of parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation. The leading ideologue was Theobald Wolfe Tone, a Church of Ireland lawyer from Dublin, who, having witnessed the disarray of the Volunteers on the Catholic question years earlier, was determined to forge a united reform movement of the various denominations. In addition he increasingly focused critical attention on the cornerstone of the existing Irish political system, 'the connection with England', although his evolution into fully fledged separatist and republican was to take a while longer. He found willing allies amongst the middle class leaders of the Catholic Committee who had recently displaced their more conservative land-owning predecessors. Determined to push more aggressively for concessions from government the new Catholic Committee appointed Tone as their secretary and over the course of 1792 mobilised for a 'Catholic Convention' held in the Tailors' Hall, Dublin in December. The Convention presented its demands directly to the London government, over the head of the implacably hostile Dublin administration. The London government, anxious to maintain the loyalty of the Catholic majority in the face of the impending war with revolutionary France, conceded almost all of the demands, except the right of Catholics to sit in parliament.

Popular politics and Defenderism

The Catholic Convention had a politicizing effect out of all proportion to the 233 delegates

who directly participated. The delegates were elected in a series of meetings that reached down to parish level involving broad sections of the people in political activity for the first time. At the same time the country was awash with a deluge of political pamphlets. In particular the campaign politicized and broadened the horizons of the Defenders. This shadowy organization first made its appearance in County Armagh in the late 1780s as a defense against the arms raids on Catholics of the 'Peep o' Day Boys', forerunners of the Orange Order, who, as a symbol of Protestant supremacy, were anxious to maintain the ban on Catholics bearing arms. By 1792/93 Defenderism had spread throughout south Ulster and north Leinster (it had even penetrated into Dublin City), and its propaganda had become more articulate and socially radical in tone. Throughout this period Tone, Samuel Neilson, Thomas Russell, and other radical United Irishmen, established contact with them which was to provide the basis for a mass-based revolutionary United Irish organisation later in the decade.

Loyalist reaction

Meanwhile the upholders of the status quo in Ireland were not idle in the face of these challenges. Along with the carrot of concessions to Catholics went the stick of repression: the gunpowder act which placed restrictions on firearms; the militia act, which envisaged a largely Catholic rank-and-file home defense force officered by Protestants, and which provoked widespread disturbances; and the convention act, which outlawed any repeat of December 1792's 'Back Lane parliament'. The latter in particular stymied United Irish plans for a repeat of that success on the issue of parliamentary reform. An Ulster convention, dominated by United Irishmen, demanding parliamentary reform met at Dungannon in February 1793 just before the convention act was passed. The Dublin Society of United Irishmen was dispersed in May 1794, a fate shared by like-minded reform movements in England and Scotland. In the circumstances of Britain's war with revolutionary France demands for reform were equated with subversion. The war acted as a pressure-cooker polarizing the situation even further and Ireland became a crucial theatre in this wider ideological struggle. At grassroots level the struggle was joined by the Defenders who became increasingly bold in their actions. As law-and-order deteriorated in the countryside government repression intensified, culminating in commander-in-chief Carhampton's brutal campaign against the Defenders in 1795. Liberal Protestant opinion was outraged at the scale of the illegalities many suspected Defenders were transported without a trial. The government response was the insurrection act which retroactively enshrined Carhampton's activities in law.

The Orange Order and the founding of Maynooth

Sectarian hostilities flared up anew in County Armagh, culminating in the expulsion of thousands of Catholics and in the foundation of the Orange Order, dedicated to the maintenance of Protestant ascendancy. Under landlord and government sponsorship it spread rapidly over the following years providing the government with a mass-based counter-revolutionary alternative to the United Irishmen. A more subtle variation of the overall counter-revolutionary strategy was the foundation of a Catholic seminary at Maynooth. Catholic seminarians would no longer be obliged to get educated in France where many of them had developed an enthusiasm for the revolution. Thus the government cultivated the support of a Catholic hierarchy itself fearful of the spread of 'French principles'.

The recall of Fitzwilliam

Early in 1795 the arrival of Fitzwilliam as lord lieutenant had raised Catholic hopes only for

Those hopes to be dashed by his sudden recall having over-stepped his brief. His successor Camden reinstated the policy of defending Protestant Ascendancy at all costs. The United Irishmen, meanwhile, had continued to meet clandestinely under various guises. The recall of Fitzwilliam removed whatever lingering hope they may have entertained for constitutional reform. The Catholic Committee dissolved itself (on the basis that 'there was no longer a Catholic question only a national question'); a new constitution was drawn up for a single mass-based revolutionary United Irish organization; and Tone was dispatched to France (via America) to solicit military aid for an armed revolution.

Bantry Bay and the 'dragooning of Ulster'

By the end of 1796 Tone's mission had borne fruit in the form of the dispatch of 16,000 French troops under General Hoche to Bantry Bay. Bad weather and bad French seamanship, however, prevented the landing of the force which in all probability could have liberated the country. Within Ireland, meanwhile, the United Irishmen had built a formidable underground network, especially in Ulster where they claimed 100,000 armed and organized men. While they waited confidently for another French invasion attempt, government forces went on the offensive. Throughout the spring and summer of 1797 the army under General Lake, augmented by the Orange Order, was let loose on the people of Ulster. The 'dragooning of Ulster' effectively disarmed and crippled United Irish organisation, especially in the middle and south of the province.

2. The rebellion

The United Irishmen go-it-alone

By the winter of 1797/98, with hopes of a renewed French attempt fading, the United Irishmen were forced to adopt a go-it-alone military strategy focused on Dublin. Their organization was strengthened in and around the capital and it also expanded in south Leinster. The planned insurrection was to have been a three-phased affair: the seizure of strategic positions within Dublin city; coordinated with the establishment of a crescent of positions outside in north County Dublin, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow; and backed up by the engagement of government forces in the counties beyond to prevent reinforcement. Disaster struck on 12 March 1798 with the arrest of most of the Leinster leadership. Further arrests on the very eve of the rising in May effectively decapitated the movement. The seizure of Dublin from within was aborted; as they waited for orders that never came, United Irish positions outside the city succumbed one by one; of the counties beyond, only in Wexford did the United Irishmen meet with success. A fortnight later (7-9 June), despite the mauling at the hands of Lake's forces the year before, the United Irishmen of Antrim and Down managed to rise up but they too were quickly defeated.

Wexford

The Wexford insurgents met with a string of early successes but were ultimately prevented from spreading the insurrection beyond their own county by defeats at New Ross (5 June) and Arklow (9 June). Massive government forces began to move in for the decisive military showdown at Vinegar Hill, outside Enniscorthy (21 June). Although the insurgents suffered defeat, the bulk of their forces escaped encirclement and carried on the struggle for another month, one group in the Wicklow mountains and the other in a 'long march' into the midlands before being worn down and forced to surrender. A month later (22 August) over a thousand French troops under General Humbert landed at Killala, County Mayo, but it was too little too late. Despite some initial successes, including a spectacular victory at Castlebar, Humbert and the United Irishmen who flocked to his standard were defeated at

Ballinamuck, County Longford (8 October). The insurrection of 1798 was over.

3. Effects of the Rebellion

The defeat of the United Irishmen also signaled the end of Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland as the Act of Union of 1800 abolished the parliament in College Green and moved all authority back to the parliament in London.

Some United Irishmen welcomed this development as the first step on the road to parliamentary reform as did many of the Catholic peasantry who envisaged their election in the English parliament. Catholic Emancipation followed in 1829 by which time the context had changed from being a wholly national issue to being a Catholic issue.

The United Irishmen ideals of a non-sectarian democracy became obscured by the politics of the ballot box based on religion. The rebellion of 1798 heightened the awareness to the Catholic peasantry of the situation that they were in and showed them that there may be alternatives to be won.

Daniel O'Connell, the Irish Famine, Parnell, Davitt and the land reform movements, all did the same thing as the majority of people in Ireland demanded more and more freedom and privilege.

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