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Thursday 25 November 2004.

‘Penal Era or Golden Age’: which better describes Ulster in the eighteenth century?

To what extent can the eighteenth century in Ulster be considered as a penal era, to what extent a golden age: this is what I will try to discuss in this essay. After the Williamite wars, the ‘Penal Laws’ were promulgated against Catholics and Presbyterians, at about the same time as trade restrictions were imposed from England against wool and cattle. Their effects was especially felt during the first half of the century, finishing the confiscations of land, exiling Catholics from public life, although several mitigating factors have to be considered. On the other hand, the eighteenth century was also a period of growth, demographic as well as economic; and that growth would have major impacts on the land, the towns and society. The end of the century would be a time of upheavals and political changes, leading to the 1798 rebellion and its aftermath, the Union.

The victory of the Williamite side in 1690 had two main consequences: the first one was that the triumphant Protestants in Ireland now wanted to make sure to remove any further threat from the Catholics (and to a lesser extent from the non-conforming Presbyterians), considered as the main culprits of the 1641 and 1688 insurgencies. The Irish parliament of 1692, dominated by the Protestant landed gentry, promulgated a series of laws (the ‘Penal Laws’), from 1695 to 1709, progressively denying the Catholic majority access to land, public office and the right to practise their religion; Presbyterians were also affected, but to a lesser extent, and would anyway be soon reintegrated (in 1719, by the Toleration Act). They were applied especially severely in Ulster compared

to the rest of the country, because of the number of Protestants settled there. The other consequence of the Williamite wars was the dependency on England, since victory had only been possible with its help. Ireland was now *de facto* a colony, and was to be treated like one: the new parliament had a very limited autonomy (since the Poyning's Act of 1494), with England keeping the final say on any bill, and trade restrictions were applied, like the Cattle Act and the Wool Act (1699) preventing exports from Ireland to any country other than England.

The main effect of the Penal Laws was the confiscation of land and power from the Catholic gentry: although representing three quarters of the total population in Ireland, Catholics owned only 14% of the land in 1703, and 5% in the 1770s. The situation was the most severe in Ulster, and the least in Connaught. This transfer of lands would favour the Protestant Ascendancy by consolidating and stabilising their power. For the Catholic labouring classes, the main effect was humiliation. However, although one of the goals was to destroy the Catholic faith in Ireland, it was never actively pursued and although the Catholic clergy and laity were driven underground, the Established Church couldn't afford a mass evangelisation (see Corish, especially). The persecution and harassment of Catholic clergy and laity was more intense in Ulster, 'mass-houses' or 'mass-rocks' were scarce there, and religious practise was difficult; but the faith survived, especially in the towns were Catholics, turning to trade, started to establish themselves. The main effect of the Cattle and Wool Acts was, especially in Ulster, the expansion of the linen trade, which had taken off in the 1680s with the arrival of Huguenot weavers

fleeing France (Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, 1684); the Linen Board was established in 1710 to encourage its development.

The Penal Laws enabled the Protestant gentry to subjugate Catholics landowners; as a result of the disproportionate power and land in their hands, and of the relative stability obtained through that power, they became wealthier and more inclined to develop the land and towns, especially in Ulster where the nascent linen industry quickly appeared as an effective investment (see Cullen). As Cullen argues, absentee landlords were a minority and, on the whole, landlords were a positive influence in the improvement of towns, houses and manufactures, thereby encouraging trade. In Ulster, the linen trade became the motor of growth, with a rapid expansion in the 1720s-30s and again in the 1740s-50s, prompting the development of villages and infrastructures: by 1800, there was 50 market towns in Ulster with over 500 inhabitants each; total linen exports rose from 2.5 million yards in the 1720s to 8 millions in the 1740s and 17 millions by 1800; the Newry canal was completed in 1743. That economic growth was not without crisis, like the famine in 1741 that killed around 300,000 people (especially in Ulster amongst poor Catholics), or the crisis in the 1770s combining bad harvests with a slump in the linen trade, and the Protestant Ascendancy was the principal beneficiary (a wealth indicated by the building of extravagant manor houses or castles, like Castle Coole and Florence Court); but eventually, all social classes would benefit to some extent, with inequalities creating tensions, and the rise of a Catholic middle class reawakening old fears.

With the relative peace and stability, population started to grow, especially after the 1740s. All in all, about a six-to-eight-fold rise between 1600 and 1841, according to Cullen. That demographic pressure had several consequences. In Ulster, added to the sporadic economic crises of the first half of the century, it spurred emigration to America, principally of Presbyterians, relative newcomers to Ireland. Combined with the interdiction of primogeniture for Catholics, and the culture of the potato (ideally suited to small farms) it led to fragmentation of lands, with the system of the middlemen and subtenants, or the idea of the farmer-weaver. Combined with the rising rents, it pushed people into trade, and favoured urbanisation.

The economic and demographic growth, however, and the rapid changes they imposed on society, started to create tensions, especially in the second half of the century. Resentment was caused by taxation, tolls and tithe, or the rising price of rents, with anger generally directed towards the landed gentry or the Established Church. In the 1760s, the "Hearts of Oaks" attacked tollgates, or the "Whiteboys" used violence to intimidate cattle-breeders. As Corish notes, those movements were not sectarian, but economic protests, and their goals reform rather than revolution. Then, in the 1770s, several years of harvest failures where followed by a slump in the linen trade, triggering a major crisis; the 'Hearts of Steel', farmers protesting against the high rents, started violent action in Down, Antrim and Armagh; emigration to America resumed (around 40,000 emigrants leaving Ulster ports between 1771 and 1774), generally weavers and tenant farmers, so that money was leaving the country. That emigration stopped in 1776 with the American Revolution, which contributed to the emergence of radical movements in Ireland.

The growth of towns and cities, and the prosperity linked to trade, contributed to the creation of an urban, educated middle-class, where Protestants and Catholics would exchange ideas, inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment. The American Revolution had prompted the formation of armed Volunteers (essentially Protestants), which then started to use their power to push for reforms, for instance a more independent parliament, the removal of export restrictions and emancipation for the Catholics (although they themselves were largely bystanders in that process); Relief Acts were passed in 1778 and 1782, removing restriction on education and land, export restriction were lifted, but parliamentary reform would have to wait. The cause of Catholics was especially championed in Belfast, where in 1784 the Volunteers, mostly Presbyterian liberals, admitted them in their ranks. The French Revolution revived the ambitions of the Volunteers to push for reforms; the United Irishmen, founded in 1791 in Belfast, strived for this as well as union among 'all the people of Ireland', Catholics as Protestants. But a majority of Protestants were fearful of Catholic emancipation, and around the same time, in Armagh, violent conflicts had started between small Catholic and Protestant tradesmen and farmers: the Peep O' Day Boys and the Defenders. Defeated in 1795, the Defenders would join forces with the United Irishmen and radicalise that movement, prompting the 1798 rebellion and a massive Protestant counter-reaction.

I think that it could be said, then, that the eighteenth century in Ulster was a penal era *and* a golden age. For Catholics, it was a time of confiscation and humiliation; although the laws were repelled towards the end of the century, they contributed to the general mistrust between Catholics and Protestants. For the Protestant Ascendancy, it was

indeed a golden age; they had the land, the wealth and the power. Although eventually the rise in trade and urbanisation was beneficial for everyone, the radicalisation of the Catholics and Protestants resulting from the combination of the repressive atmosphere and the unequally shared economic boom would crystallise into Irish republicanism and the Orange Order.

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