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Modern Imperialism

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Ireland: the British Colony

With the passing of the Acts of Union in 1800, Ireland came under the direct control of the British Empire. However, unlike their treatment of their other neighbor, Scotland, Britain treated Ireland very harshly. When examined, the acts of the British Empire, and the relationship between the native Irish and the aristocracy more closely resembles the typical profile of one of Britain’s colonies at the time. This can be seen in the criminal justice system, with the conditions of Irish prisons, or gaols, and of the laws that the Irish were tried by. One of the most significant abuses of this system was the prosecution of debtors. For decades, debtors were imprisoned for being unable to pay off their debts, and even when this was changed, prosecutors abused the system in different ways. Yet another of the abuses of the criminal justice system came with the Crimes Act of 1887. One of the leading causes of crime in Ireland was the terrible working conditions. The vast majority of Catholic Irish were tenant farmers, renting land from a landlord and working it under their employ. Overall, almost half of the the whole country was owned by under a thousand landlords. The conditions of the tenants was a far cry from what would be expected from English farmers, with the tenants living in conditions more comparable to the sharecropping system seen in the United States after the Civil War, with tenants living in poor conditions and having to cow to their landlord’s every whim. This was possible because the farm system of Ireland was poorly regulated, leaving landlords who could hire muscle with sole authority. However, the factor that had the most impact on the treatment of the Irish, specifically as a colony, was the tensions between the two countries’ religions. Much of the language spoken by the British to justify the treatment of Ireland resembles Imperialist language, and many of these feelings stem from the British view of Catholicism. This can be seen in one Englishman’s explanation of the Famine as “a divine punishment on a wicked, perverse people.”[[1]](#footnote-0) This view of the Irish is what fueled much of the harsh treatment the English imposed on them.

One of the signs of imperial rule in Ireland was the corruption and discrimination in the criminal justice system set up by the British Empire. The criminal justice system frequently exploited the Irish in order to extort money for funding. This is because many of the offices that dealt with criminal cases were themselves funded by fees paid by people who had committed criminal offences.[[2]](#footnote-1) The courts turned to this after it was made illegal to imprison someone for being unable to pay their debts. Instead of imprisoning them for defaulting, the court would have the defendant pay fees and fines. This is because it was not illegal to imprison someone over being unable to pay a fine. This also played a part in what prison an offender would be sent to. Debtors and those who committed political or white collar crimes were sent to nicer prisons, where they were allowed to keep their belongings, have food sent in from the outside, and even conduct their business from within the prison. However, people who were unable to pay fines were sent to prisons for common criminals, which had much poorer conditions.[[3]](#footnote-2) These included: sleeping on a bed without a mattress, having their hair cut, and being unable to meet with friends or read anything besides the Bible. They were also required to do hard labor.[[4]](#footnote-3)

An unprecedented use of the criminal justice system to discriminate against the Irish came with the passing of the Crimes Act of 1877. With this, 22 of the 103 Irish representatives in the House of Commons were prosecuted, convicted and imprisoned without trial by jury. What’s more is that they were placed in prisons meant for common criminals, rather than the ones meant for first class misdemeanors described earlier.[[5]](#footnote-4)

It may be doubted whether, ever in the previous history of representative institutions in any part of the world, it has occurred that one-fifth of all the representatives of a country have been subjected to imprisonment, and treated as common criminals, for acts, for the most part, of a distinctly political character, and without criminality, in the true sense of the term.[[6]](#footnote-5)

This massive incarceration is a clear showing of abuse of imperial power in order to influence politics. It also shows that, even though Irish Catholics were allowed to serve in Parliament, the British government still held ultimate power over those representatives. This blatant disregard for established rules in order to maintain control is indicative of an Imperial government maintaining control of a colony. “It has been by a party vote, and by a majority of English members only, that these coercive proceedings have been authorised or have escaped condemnation.”[[7]](#footnote-6) It is the same as what the British Empire had done in its other colonies like India, or in the Mandate system like in Iraq.

The actions taken by the British government, both in laws passed and the more local discrimination resemble those taken in their colonies more than the policies in other nations under the dominion of the British Empire. Countries like Canada, Scotland and Australia had the power to govern their own local affairs, but Ireland had these laws forced upon it. It had laws sent down from on high, because the British considered the Irish incapable of keeping order amongst themselves, the same way they viewed their other colonies. Furthermore, the British blatantly removed several Irish officials from office, similar to how the Empire would remove any native official who seemed to be a threat to British rule. The only difference between the two is that the Irish representatives removed were a part of the British government, which only shows how deep the hatred of the Irish ran in some Englishmen that they would be willing to compromise their own government. This can be seen in the above quote, showing that the ones who facilitated the arrests were a group of English members of Parliament. These arrested representatives essentially served as political prisoners, bargaining chips in an attempt to forestall violent action on the part of Irish nationalists at a time when tensions between the English and Irish were especially high.

One might argue that the fact that Irish Catholics were allowed to serve in Parliament shows a significant difference in their treatment and that of a colony’s. However, the act of incarcerating a fifth of said representatives shows that the English did not view allowing the Irish representation as a genuine move towards Irish autonomy, but rather as a method of placating the masses who were growing more and more dissatisfied with life under the rule of the British Empire.

One of the biggest influences on the relationship between the British and the Irish in the 19th century was the farming system in Ireland. It was a system that left thousands poor and, as Alexander de Tocqueville once stated, “The ‘Prosecutor for the Crown’ told us: a multitude of criminal cases in the south of Ireland have their origin in the desire to possess land.”[[8]](#footnote-7) This focus on land comes from the fact that, at the time, Ireland had very little industry. The vast majority of Catholics worked as tenants on farms, in poor conditions under tyrannical landlords. Even though the British outlawed slavery in 1833, this system lasted well into the nineteenth century.

The life of an Irish tenant farmer was a harsh one.While a very small number of landlords owned most of the land in Ireland, they divided their lands into very small farms to be rented out to tenant farmers. [[9]](#footnote-8) Landlords gave extremely high rates to the farmers and since the landlords were the only ones with good credit and money to lend, tenant farmers often ended up getting loans from their employers. This, along with the lack of industrial jobs to flee to, kept the farmers trapped on their borrowed lands. Overall, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was estimated that about 140,000, or one fifth, of Irish tenant farmers were bankrupt.[[10]](#footnote-9) Tenant farmers lived lives of subsistence: “A typical rural dwelling was a mud cabin with a dirt floor that could turn into a muddy mire in heavy Irish rains, and a vermin-saturated that roof. Often there was not even one window to let in fresh air.”[[11]](#footnote-10) These conditions seem more like something out of the Middle Ages than a modern state that was a part of the British Empire.

The relationship between tenant and landlord gives a perfect look at the feelings the Irish and English held for each other. The Catholic Irish tenants lived in a state of near-slavery under the rule of their landlords. Tenants were expected to be completely subservient to their landlords and any resistance was put down by armed guards hired by the landowner. This ranged from acting as the owner’s servant, to vile acts that are straight out of the accounts of those who suffered under slavery in the American South; such as tenants being expected to offer their wives and daughters to the landlord. In one case, a landlord had a tenant commit murder for him. This was allowed to go on because, like the American South, there was very little government presence and the landlords acted as the main sources of authority.[[12]](#footnote-11) This was only perpetuated due to Ireland’s growing population. The growing population meant more people needed farms, which led to landlords having to give every tenant smaller farms. Smaller farms meant that tenants grew less and made less, leaving them more likely to go into debt. Many landlords did not even reside on the lands that they owned. It was estimated that in 1887, there were about 1,443 absentee landlords. These absentees would hire people to run the farms for them, and these agents would often be just as harsh as the landowner, except that tenants could no longer profess their grievances directly to the landowner.[[13]](#footnote-12) Even other Englishmen acknowledged the horrific actions of those who owned land in Ireland, as seen in this quote by George Cornwall Lewis, a British statesman and noble:

It has often been remarked, that one of the chief evils of slavery is that it corrupts the master as well as the slave. The Irish landlord, during the rigour of the anti-catholic code, was subjected to all the temptations arising from the possession of irresponsible power. Not only did he become harsh and tyrannical to his inferiors, but reckless and sensual in his habits of living, profuse in his expenditure, violent in his quarrels, intolerant in the assertion of his religious opinions, corrupt and partial in the exercise of his official authority.[[14]](#footnote-13)

This quote acknowledges that the acts of these landlords were extreme, in some cases too extreme for those who hated the Irish. It also shows that contemporaries were not blind to the pseudo-slavery that Irish tenants were subjected to.

While the tenant system exhibits discrimination by individuals against Irish farmers, the Great Famine shows how the British government viewed the tenants. The Famine is, quite possibly, one of the most traumatic moments in Irish history. Due to the country’s over-reliance on the potato crop, due to how easy it was to cultivate and that it could grow in bad soil, a disease known as the potato blight wiped out over a fifth of the population’s food source. During the Famine nearly a million Irish died, and another million emigrated to the United States, reducing the country’s population by nearly a quarter. The British response to this tragedy once again shows a resemblance to the treatment of a colony. While some Englishmen provided relief out of the kindness of their hearts, many required the recipients change their religion in order to receive aid. Charles Edward Trevelyan, the man responsible for government relief measures, famously proclaimed that the Famine was “a divine punishment on a wicked, perverse people.”[[15]](#footnote-14) This feeling was deeply rooted in the hatred for the Irish’s continued belief in Catholicism. The British government’s response to the Famine was slightly different, or rather, their explanation was. In total, the government spent 15 million pounds in relief for those affected by the potato famine, while they would spend about 70 million to fund the Crimean War that would begin the year after the Famine had ended.[[16]](#footnote-15) The government’s explanation for the limited spending was thus:

They argued that Famine relief should not interfere with normal commercial activity, compete with private business, discourage personal initiative, make the Irish psychologically dependent on government charity, or interfere with private property or individual responsibility.[[17]](#footnote-16)

This shows a clear imperial mentality, specifically that of paternalism. Rather, it is an excuse not to spend money on relief disguised as paternalism. Either way, it is a clear sign that the government did not hold much sympathy for the plight of the Irish, even if individual Englishmen did. It also shows that the government valued a free-enterprise economy more than providing needed aid to those suffering from the Famine.[[18]](#footnote-17) The Famine fostered increased tensions on both sides, with the British seeing it as Ireland’s just reward for their choice of religion, and the Irish gained a deep seated for the English, even stronger than before. The Famine would come to be known as possibly the most significant event in Ireland in the 19th century.

Overall, the state of the Irish agricultural system shows once again how Ireland was treated as a colony by the British Empire. The locals lived in subservient roles under their landlords who were comparatively small in number. The conditions in which they lived were akin to slavery and the system was designed to keep tenants working on their farms, unable to escape. The government’s response to the Famine prioritized British economic interests over the welfare of the people who were dying of starvation.

The factor that fueled much of the British’s cruel treatment of the Irish was their difference in religion. Almost all of the attitudes and cruel acts can be traced to a British revulsion of the Irish Catholic population, at least on an individual level. Most of the tenants in Ireland were Catholic, with the landlords being predominantly Protestant. Not only that, but for years after the Acts of Union, Catholics could not serve in Parliament. This left the entire country of Ireland, which was mostly catholic, represented in Parliament by an entirely Protestant group of representatives. As can be seen in the above quotes, there was no love lost between Protestants and Catholics in Parliament. Due to Protestants holding all of the Irish Parliamentary seats, as well as other privileged positions, it ended up that most local government positions were also held by Protestants.[[19]](#footnote-18)

This assault on the majority of the Irish’s beliefs led to their adherence to Catholicism only getting stronger. The discrimination of Catholics was a condemnation of the entire country as backwards and heathenistic. As Alexander de Tocqueville put it, “For the Irish, religion has become not a matter of faith, but of patriotism.”[[20]](#footnote-19) The matter of religion lay at the heart of the animosity between the English and the Irish. Many of the discriminatory acts perpetrated by the English have their causes rooted in hatred for Catholics, and mostly it is outright stated by the oppressors themselves. As mentioned above, a popular explanation of the Great Famine was that it was divine punishment on the Irish for worshipping the wrong faith. The treatment of Irish Catholics is actually more extreme than the treatment of other colonial religions. The typical religious aspect of colonization around the globe was simply to send missionaries, as well as some perks to converting to the “right” religion. There was nothing like the severe discrimination experienced by the Irish Catholics.

In conclusion, the manner in which the British Empire governed the nation of Ireland more closely resembles that of an imperial colony, rather than the other nations that more closely resemble the English and Irish. Whereas Scotland, Canada and Australia were treated as civilized countries that could eventually be trusted with their own government, Ireland was under the direct control of Britain, with any attempt to give Home Rule coming far too late for it to matter. The criminal justice system was blatantly abusive, both towards the common citizen, and even to elected officials. The common Irishman was trapped in a loophole that allowed him to be jailed for being unable to pay a fine or fee, and the Crimes Act of 1877 allowed the British government to jail a number of elected Irish representatives. The discrimination also occurred on a more local level, with the Irish agricultural system. Tenants lived in a horrific form of pseudo-slavery under the tyrannical rule of a comparatively small number of landlords. This was only exasperated by the Great Famine in the mid-19th century, which more than decimated the Irish population. The British government gave comparatively little relief aid on the basis that it would hurt the economy, valuing their own economic safety over the lives of the Irish. This is a distinctly imperial course of action, to ignore the suffering of a people, purportedly for their own good, claiming that helping would only hurt them. The relationship between the English and the Irish was influenced by a centuries old conflict between the two countries’ religions. The discriminations of the Irish fell disproportionately on the Catholic population, with the majority of tenant farmers being Catholic, and Catholics being unable to serve in Parliament for decades after the Acts of union in 1800. While animosity may have been the driving force of many of the British policies, it was hidden under the rhetoric that is indicative of imperial rule: “In England and Scotland the form of society is so firmly established, that if we consider large periods of time, little seems to depend on the individual character or acts of the person who may, for the time being, stand at the head of affairs...But it is otherwise in Ireland. Improvement and civilization must there descend from above; they will not rise spontaneously from the inward workings of the community.”[[21]](#footnote-20)

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