

13.5 Ireland: Britain's First Colony

Source: New York State Great Irish Famine Curriculum

Background: Experiments with Ireland, from military suppression to economic exploitation, was the laboratory for British colonial policy. Historian Roy Porter in the *Penguin Social History of Britain* (1982) argues that “John Bull’s other island, anglicized Ireland, was the most colonial part of Britain, being bullied and bled by a frequently absentee Protestant landlord class.” In accordance with mercantilist theories and paralleling British policies with the empire’s new world colonies, “Irish industry was sacrificed to English manufacturers” and the “export of Irish wool and cloth” was banned, except to England.” Lord Clare was a leading advocate of a formal union between Ireland and England in the United Kingdom under one Parliament and King. Clare warned that the Irish elite should consider what would happen if Ireland became independent. Clare used the term colony to refer to English settlers in Ireland. Passages B and passages are by leaders of the struggle for greater rights for the Irish. Jonathan Swift was a noted author who wrote at the beginning of the 18th century. When he wrote, Ireland had its own Parliament. His demand is for the same rights as Englishmen. Wolfe Tone was a leader of United Irishmen at the end of the 18th century. He demanded independence for Ireland. McNally was also a leader of United Irishman but he is suspected of being a spy for the British government.

Questions

1. What is Lord Clare’s concern? Why did he support the integration of Ireland into the United Kingdom?
2. While he wrote 75 years prior to Lord Clare, how does Swift “respond” to the ideas expressed by Clare?
3. What are Wolfe Tone’s “objects”?
4. Why did McNally believe Ireland was ripe for rebellion against England?
4. In your opinion, how did British policy in Ireland set the stage for treatment of its colonial empire?

A. Lord Clare (British Attorney-General for Ireland from 1783 to 1789 and Lord Chancellor of Ireland from 1789 to 1802): “The whole power and property has been conferred by successive monarchs of England upon an English colony composed of three sorts of English adventurers who poured into this country at the termination of three successive rebellions. Confiscation is their common title and from their first settlement they have been hemmed in on every side by the old inhabitants of the island, brooding over their discontents in sullen indignation. What was the security of the English settlers for their physical existence? And what is the security of their descendants at this day? The powerful and commanding position of Great Britain. If by any fatality, it fails, you are at the mercy of the old inhabitants of this island, and I should have hoped that the examples of mercy exhibited by them in the late rebellion would have taught the gentlemen who call themselves the Irish nation to reflect with sober attention on the dangers which surround them.”

B. Jonathan Swift (1724): “Were not the people of Ireland born as free as those of England? Is not their Parliament as fair and as representative of the people as that of England? Are they subjects of the same King? Does not the same sun shine on them? And have they not the same God for their protector? Am I a free man in England, and do I become a slave in six hours by crossing the Channel?”

C, Wolfe Tone (1791): “To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, to break the connection with England, the never failing source of all our political evils and to assert the independence of my country -- these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter - these were my means.”

Leonard McNally (1796): “The whole body of the peasantry would join the French in case of an invasion. . . The suffering of the common people from high rents and low wages, from oppressions of their landlords . . . and tithes are not the only causes of disaffection to Government and hatred of England; for though these have long kept the Irish peasant in a state of slavery and indigence, yet another cause, more dangerous, pervaded them all. . . This cause is an attachment to French principles in politics and religion, and an ardent desire for a republican government.”

