

From roots to present

The Irish Problem

To discuss the Irish situation is, at best, very difficult since most of us simply do not know the facts. Robert Voakes, of the Silhouette staff, does. An explosive, often misunderstood country is profiled in his article giving the original causes of the trouble, telling how they have been compounded over the years, and showing the true perspective of a 'civilized' country.

History to 1914

Before English colonists began massacring the natives of North America, the aborigines of Australia the Bantu of South Africa, before even John Hawkins found out the profit to be had in transferring the black gold of West Africa to Savannah, the English had successfully carried out a classic example of colonial exploitation in Ireland.

During the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, English kings, their attention diverted by European prizes, kept Ireland half conquered, half free. By the end of the fifteenth century however the conquest was completed and Ireland was governed by great Anglo-Irish aristocrats. When Henry VIII decided that he, not the Pope, was the temporal God of Britain, the strategic importance of Ireland grew. The peasants of Ireland were Catholic and resisted all attempts to convert them to the English Church.

Ireland, with its many harbours, its hostile population was there — fore a convenient invasion point for England's continental enemies.

By the end of Elizabeth's reign, by which time the Irish had been thoroughly crushed, the Catholic religion was the symbol of Irish nationalism and defiance of the Protestant English overlords.

The next two hundred years of Irish history saw the systematic destruction of the small Irish bourgeoisie and what remained of the Irish nobility. English and Scots colonies were established as a deliberate policy of strengthening the English control. English landlords ruled over their plantations with nearly the same power over their Irish peasants, as the Americans held over their slaves.

In northern Ireland, Scots farmers seized, and tilled the land themselves, complicating the colonial situation. No longer was Ireland a simple case of English overlord, English bourgeoisie and Irish peasant, the Scots of Ulster became the "white trash" of Ireland. Scarcely better off than their Catholic Irish class companions, they demonstrated their superiority by a passionate attachment to the Protestant faith, and later to the English monarchy.

The danger of Ireland to England was made evident in 1690 when James II, recently deposed Catholic king of England, faced William of Orange, Protestant, soon to be William III of England, at the battle of the Boyne, mid-way between Dublin and the present border. James, seeking his lost throne landed in Ireland, and received enthusiastic support from the peasants. William in Ulster was declared king by the Protestant colony, and after he had trounced James he rewarded the Protestants by allowing them to enforce a penal code that placed



Catholics in Ireland under every possible political and social disadvantage.

Time passed, the English landlords became more entrenched, consolidating their power through their political dominance of the English House of Lords and by the establishment in 1795 of the Orange Order, a masonic type of secret society whose sole purpose was to maintain the protestant hegemony in Ireland.

The state of the peasants grew steadily worse as their numbers increased while the potato crop, the staple food, remained static.

The Catholics after much pressure in England and Ireland, causing several political crises were finally granted something approaching emancipation in 1829, four years before slavery was abolished throughout the Empire. The stigma of being Catholic remained however, for the traditional argument that Catholics gave their allegiance to the Pope rather than the monarch continued to be widely accepted.

Nationalism grows

During the rest of the nineteenth century the nationalism of the Irish grew, political activity for independence, or at least home rule being in the British Parliament by Irish M.P.'s and more identity by the Fenians whose campaign of terror reached a height with the murder of two cabinet ministers as they strolled in Dublin's Phoenix Park.

In 1884 Gladstone's liberal party committed to Irish Home Rule was betrayed by its aristocratic, landowning Wing in the House of Lords, who threw out the Home Rule bill of that year. Pressure for Home Rule mounted however and by 1914 Britain was on the verge of civil war. The Irish nationalists gained arms from Germany and were prepared for rebellion. The Protestant die-hards in the north formed the Ulster Volunteers with

the connivance of the Conservative Party in Parliament, at that time in opposition to the governing liberal party still attempting to achieve Home Rule.

No solution seemed possible, civil war in Ireland, which was part of Great Britain was unavoidable. For tuitously the outbreak of the First World War froze the situation, as the bitterest of enemies embraced a common crusade against the Hun.

Rebellion crushed

The Sinn Fein however, Irish Nationalists, were impatient, in faster 1916 They rebelled only to be blood ily defeated and martyred by British troops. The reprisals that followed turned most Catholics away from the moderated nationalists demand for Home Rule, to the Sinn Fein demand for complete independence of all Ireland from Britain.

With the end of the war in 1918, the demand was immediately heard for immediate Irish independence. The prevarication of Lloyd George, Prime Minister, encouraged rident action which resulted in the Anglo-Irish War, Spring 1919 — July 1921. Beginning as sporadic attacks by the Irish Republican Army upon British troops, the war escalated, providing a classic example of an anti-imperialist urban guerilla warfare with assassination, kidnapping, arson and atrocities by both sides becoming increasingly common. When the I.R.A. succeeded in shooting most of the British intelligence section in Dublin, the security forces retaliated by spraying the crowd at a local football game with machine guns.

Border established

Peace was finally achieved by the agreement that Ireland received independence, with some

imperial links remaining to save British prestige. Nine counties in Ulster however were to be able to choose whether in to join the new Irish Free State or retain its links with England.

Only in four of these counties were the Protestants clearly in the majority, however the influence of the Orange Order in the ruling elite of Britain was such as to ensure six counties were held from the independent Irish state to the south. The inclusion of two Catholic dominated counties in Ulster ensured the continuance of friction, and if this were not enough, since 1921 until today Catholics in Ulster have been systematically excluded from most positions of importance.

The political position of Ulster was that of a province of Great Britain. As such it sent M.P.'s to the London Parliament. However, Ulster also had its own government, the Stormont, which had virtual independence from Britain in all domestic matters.

The Irish nationalists of the Free State, now the Republic of Ireland have never been reconciled to the position, and during the 1930's and even in the 1950's expressed their displeasure by isolated acts of terrorism in Ulster and in England. The worst single act took place in Coventry, England in August 1938 when five people were killed and seventy wounded.

The bitterness of the Free State to England was made clear in 1939, when Ireland was the only member of the Commonwealth not to fight with Britain in the Second World War.

The years after 1945 saw the Republic finally disentangling the links which still held her to Britain and in 1949 the Free State, now known as Eire, left the Commonwealth.

The "problem of Ireland" which had been the self-imposed bane of England seemed after 1949 to be solved at last. The Catholics of