

Ireland, An English Colony for 753 Years, 1169-1922

Our pianist Bill is a second-generation Irish-American who grew up with immigrant Irish grandparents and aunts in Oakland, California. When his grandparents and aunts and uncles left Ireland, it was an English colony, and they were colonial subjects of Queen Victoria. His grandmother and aunts grew up in rural County Galway (in western Ireland) speaking English and Irish. However, he never heard them speak Irish. During the long centuries when the English harshly controlled Ireland, they suppressed the Irish language and tried to eradicate it.

The Colonial Empire on which the sun never sets.

When Bill's ancestors left Ireland, England was at the height of its colonial power. The British Empire was the largest empire in human history and was known as the empire on which "the sun never sets" due to its global reach.

England competed with other European countries for control of the continents of Africa and Asia, but by 1914 Great Britain controlled the largest number of colonies. In Africa, for example, from 1880-1900, Britain gained control over or occupied what are now known as Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Nigeria, Gambia, Sierra Leone, northwestern Somalia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, Ghana, and Malawi. After World War I, British possessions in East Africa increased. Germany lost the war and per the Treaty of Versailles lost its African colonies. Most of German East Africa went to Great Britain.

Ireland: Great Britain's Longest-Held Colony

Great Britain tenaciously held on to its colonies in the Americas, Africa and Asia for as long as it could. But the length of time it held these colonies pales in

comparison to how long it held Ireland, its colony in Europe. The English controlled Ireland for 753 Years, 1169-1922.

British colony	Length of Time Held
Ireland	753 years, 1169-1922
United States	169 years, 1607-1776
Hong Kong	156 years, 1841-1997
India	89 years, 1858-1947
Kenya	68 years, 1895-1965
Uganda	68 years, 1894-1962
Nigeria	60 years, 1900-1960

The Origins of British Colonialism in Ireland

In 1155, Adrian IV, the only ever English pope, issued a papal 'bull' entitled Laudabiliter that was interpreted as giving the Norman King Henry II the right to invade and rule Ireland (Henry II was appointed as the “Overlord” of Ireland). The ‘bull’ also sought to enforce Roman church norms on Ireland's semi-autonomous Gaelic church. The English used a dispute between Irish kings as a pretext to invade and conquer Ireland (1169-1171) and made Ireland part of their empire for 753 years.

(Note: The Norman king Henry II was the great grandson of William the Conqueror who led the Norman-French invasion of England in 1066 and the conquest of the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings.)

The Devastation of Irish Culture After the Battle of Kinsale (1601-1602)

The English crown claimed Ireland as a lordship since 1175, but the Irish were not completely subjected and had a degree of autonomy. The Tudor monarchs,

starting with Henry VIII, wanted to change this situation and reassert their authority in Ireland with a policy of conquest and colonialization. In late 1601, the British sent a well-drilled professional army with modern weaponry and powerful war horses that defeated the Irish at the Battle of Kinsale (County Cork, Oct 2, 1601-Jan 3, 1602).

The English victory at the Battle of Kinsale broke the old Gaelic system and was devastating to the existing Irish culture and way of life. As the Gaelic aristocracy fled to continental Europe, they left behind a power vacuum that English authorities took advantage of.

The English administration saw the ideal opportunity to seize most of the land of Ulster and to bring Presbyterian Lowland Scots and northern English settlers to farm it. The English had achieved their objectives of destroying the old Gaelic order and ridding themselves of the clan system and the more troublesome chieftains.

The Severity of British Colonialism in Ireland: England's Pantry

The British Empire was the largest empire in human history, and England, a small island nation, employed often severe methods to control and maintain it, for example, with the Mau Mau in Kenya in the 1950s. The English were also severe with their colony in Europe, Ireland. (The following information is drawn from an excellent new book by Michael O'Malley, *The Beat Cop* (2022)).

“Land in Ireland belonged almost without exception to the English, to distant landlords who ruled tens of thousands of acres and might never bother to visit the lands that produced the rents supporting them in idleness. England deliberately kept Ireland isolated from industrialization so that it might serve as ‘England's pantry,’ a source of food and wealth, poor but productive.” (p. 13)

The Irish Ate Potatoes So Landlords Could Export Cattle and Cash Crops.

“England controlled the law and administered justice as a colonial power does, so as to best serve itself. During the course of the famine, while hundreds of thousands starved, Ireland continued to export meat and grain to England.” (p. 14)

“The Irish grew potatoes because landlords reserved the best lands for cattle and export crops that brought cash, while potatoes thrived in the rockiest and most unpromising soils from which the Irish poor fed themselves. By the 1840s, the majority of Irish people ate almost nothing but potatoes. Diet might include milk from a cow, typically the buttermilk left after churning; oats in some regions; seaweed and fish near the coasts. A typical farm might additionally keep a pig, not to feed the family but to sell to pay the rent.

“If people ate the pig, because their potatoes failed, they had no way to pay the rent. Landlords, who had long waited to ‘clear the land’ of poor tenants and expand the opportunities for more profitable crops, eagerly sent men with crowbars to pull down houses and evict tenants. Sick, hungry, homeless people sheltered where they could or headed into workhouses, grim Dickensian institutions quickly overwhelmed by the scale of the calamity. People died on the road to lie unburied. Starvation killed hundreds of thousands of people directly, but it also made survivors weak and vulnerable to disease, unable to earn a living. It is impossible to know exactly how many died – be it from starvation, disease, displacement, or other related factors – but in some regions half the population vanished in about five years.” (pp. 11-12)

“Redundant population,” brushed away by a “necessary social revolution”

“Hundreds of years before the English had seized land and driven occupants to the west, they had worked to suppress the Irish language and demand servility. Irish peasants doffed their cap or curtsied when the lord rode by; they suffered, but the *Illustrated London News* called the sufferers “redundant population,” brushed away by a “necessary social revolution.” (p. 14)

“Crowds of miserable Irish darken all our towns.”

British philosopher Thomas Carlyle not only thought the Irish were “redundant population” but also were miserable beings that “darken all our towns.” In 1840, for example, Carlyle “had complained that ‘crowds of miserable Irish darken all our towns.’ He loathed their ‘wild Milesian features’ and the fact that their ‘restlessness, unreason, misery and mockery, salute you on all highways and byways.’ Sunk in ‘squalid apehood,’ the Irishman ‘is the sorest evil this country has to strive with.’” (p. 77)

Irish Risings to Break Free of British Colonial Rule

As noted earlier, the British Empire was the largest empire in human history, and England, a small island nation, employed often severe methods to control it. England maintained professional, well-drilled armies with modern weaponry and powerful war horses (motor vehicles were not used in warfare until "The Great War," starting in 1916).

Despite British military might, the Irish rose up against their colonial masters throughout the long centuries of English rule. For example, the Irish Rebellion of 1798 was an insurrection aimed at overthrowing the Kingdom of Ireland, severing the connection with Great Britain and establishing an Irish Republic. The Irish

uprising was put down with great bloodshed in the summer of 1798. Some of its leaders, notably Wolfe Tone were killed or died in imprisonment, while many others were exiled.

"The Wearing of the Green" (included in our St. Patrick's Day concert) is an Irish street ballad lamenting the repression of supporters of the Irish Rebellion of 1798. The song proclaims that "they are hanging men and women for the wearing of the green."

The Easter Uprising. Ireland Frees Itself from British Colonialism (1922)

The Easter Rising (Irish: Éirí Amach na Cásca), also known as the Easter Rebellion, was an armed insurrection in Ireland during Easter Week in April 1916. The Rising was launched by Irish republicans against British rule in Ireland with the aim of establishing an independent Irish Republic. It was the most significant uprising in Ireland since the rebellion of 1798 and the first armed conflict of the Irish revolutionary period. Sixteen of the Rising's leaders were executed from May 1916. The nature of the executions, and subsequent political developments, ultimately contributed to an increase in popular support for Irish independence.

The Irish War of Independence, the "Black and Tan War" or the Anglo-Irish War of 1919-21, followed. It ended with the negotiation of a treaty with England. Most of Ireland gained independence from Great Britain following the Anglo-Irish War. Initially formed as a Dominion called the Irish Free State in 1922, the Republic of Ireland became a fully independent republic following the passage of the Republic of Ireland Act in 1949.