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European Empires  
April 4, 2016  

The European Colony

Ireland is our disgrace. It is the reproach, the standing disgrace, of this country that Ireland remains in the condition she is. It is so regarded throughout the whole civilised world. – Lord Henry Grey, 1846

It has been said that the sun never sets on the British Empire. The Empire reached all over the globe colonizing many nations in a brutal fashion. The conquest and colonization of nations such as India and Zambia are subjects of great scrutiny for the bloodshed and the maltreatment of those colonized by the British. However, one early colony of the British is often overlooked and is frequently seen in a different light. Ireland is an island just next to Britain and it was the victim of colonization in the mid-17th century. Could it be that for being fellow white Christians that the Irish were treated better due to their religion and skin color, or were they just as oppressed and victimized as other colonized peoples? The Irish were victims of religious persecution, racism, slavery, and were mistreated by English Law; factors that occur in the other various instances of British conquest. Many have even accused the English, particularly Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, of genocide in Ireland. These claims, as well as other injustices done unto the Irish people will be the focus of my research.

Ireland’s conquest in the 17th century was a violent and chaotic affair. The bulk of the British Conquest happened under the command of Oliver Cromwell. Before becoming the Lord Protector of England on December 16, 1653, Oliver Cromwell led a Parliamentary invasion of Ireland beginning in the year 1649. Cromwell departed in 1650 but the actual conquest of Ireland concluded in 1652. The events that took place in the conquest of Ireland were bloody, but do
they constitute a genocide? Genocide is something that has been defined only recently, but it has taken place in human history long before it had a name. Though the United Nations was not around at this time, the United Nations still provide us with a definition for what constitutes a genocide in modern eyes’. According to the “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” in 1948, “[G]enocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”¹

The Cromwellian Conquest of Ireland certainly played host to some of these acts, aimed particularly at Catholics in Ireland. Irishmen and particularly Catholics were killed, but not merely as casualties of war. One of the most infamous events in the Cromwellian Conquest was the Siege of Drogheda, where a great deal of bloodshed occurred following Cromwell’s victory over the Catholic Irishmen. Even though quarter was given to officers on the Irish side following the battle, it did little to protect them. In a letter written by James Buck, a soldier under Cromwell, to Sir Ralph Verney he says, “Your brother and my dear friend, Sir Edmond Verney, who behaved himself with the greatest gallantry that could be, he was slain at Drogheda three days after quarter was given him, as he was walking with Cromwell by way of protection. One Ropier, who is brother to the Lord Ropier, called him aside in a pretence to speak with him being

formerly of acquaintance, and instead of some friendly office which Sir Edmond might expect from him he barbarously ran him through with a tuck\textsuperscript{2} and he goes on to describe another such murder, “The next day after one Lt.-Col. Boyle, who had quarter likewise given him, as he was at dinner with my Lady More, sister to the Earl of Sunderland, in the same town, one of Cromwell’s soldiers came and whispered him in the ear, to tell him he must presently be put to death; who, rising from the table, the lady asked him whither he was going, he answered, "Madam, to die," who no sooner stepped out of the room but he was shot to death.” Though this letter comes from an English soldier, it is likely a reliable source as he was unhappy with the actions committed by his own side. “These are cruelties of these traitors; who, no doubt, will find the like mercy when they are in need of it.”\textsuperscript{3} In a letter from Cromwell himself to William Lenthall he mentions a great deal of violence done to surrendered enemies, “When they submitted, their officers were knocked on the head; and every tenth man of the soldiers killed; and the rest shipped for the Barbadoes. The soldiers in the other Tower were all spared, as to their lives only; and shipped likewise for the Barbadoes. I am persuaded that this is a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches”\textsuperscript{4} Here we are presented with undeniable evidence of both the flogging and decimation of prisoners, as well as the enslavement of the survivors from Oliver Cromwell himself. This would constitute both “Killing members of the group” as well as “Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” making the case for genocide all the stronger.

\textsuperscript{2} European Sword used in this period.

\textsuperscript{3} Buck, James (8 November 1649). Letter to Sir Ralph Verney of Claydon, Bucks. Sent from Caen.

Perhaps the most egregious and outright example of genocide were the actions taken against Catholics during the Conquest. Though both the English and the Irish were Christian, this did little to mitigate the poor treatment the Irish underwent. England, being a Protestant nation considered Catholicism to be both wicked and dangerous. The famous and then-highly influential author John Milton expressed his feelings about the Irish and their religion in his *Observations upon the Articles of Peace with the Irish Rebels*, “The main targets, however, are the authors of the Articles of Peace and the ‘Papist Rebels of Ireland’ (*Observations, YP* 3.300), whom he characterizes as ‘barbarous, savage, uncouth, but, worst of all, papistical in religious belief’” His thoughts on toleration of the Catholics were as follows, “[A]s for poperie and idolatrie, why they . . . may not hence plead to be tolerated, I have much less to say. Their religion the more considerd, the less can be acknowledged a religion; but a Roman principalitie rather, endeavouring to keep up her old universal dominion under a new name and meer shaddow of a catholic religion; being indeed more rightly nam’d a catholic heresie against the scripture; supported mainly by a civil, and, except in Rome, by a forein, power: justly therfore to be suspected, not tolerated, by the magistrate of another countrey. Besides, of an implicit faith, which they profess, the conscience also becomes implicit; and so by voluntarie servitude to mans law, forfets her Christian libertie.”

This makes it apparent that Catholicism was seen as dangerous by the British Protestants which make the following actions taken against the Catholics by the Protestants to be more understandable. In the same letter from Oliver Cromwell to William Lenthall he describes the massacre of civilians following the Siege of Drogheda, “near 1,000 of them were put to the sword, fleeing thither for safety. I believe all their friars were knocked on the head promiscuously but two: the one of which was Father Peter Taaff, brother to

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Lord Taaff, whom the soldiers took, the next day and made an end of. The other was taken in the Round Tower, under the repute of a Lieutenant, and when he understood that the officers in that Tower had no quarter, he confessed he was a Friar; but that did not save him.” Even Catholic Churches were not safe from the destruction wrought by Cromwell, “about 100 of them possessed St. Peter's Church-steeple, some the west Gate, and others a strong Round Tower next the Gate called St. Sunday's. These, being summoned to yield to mercy, refused. Whereupon I ordered the steeple of St.' Peter's Church to be fired, when one of them was, heard to say in the midst of the flames: ‘God damn me, God confound me: I burn, I burn.’”

Even following the Conquest, the Catholics of Ireland were not spared persecution. The Act for the Settlement of Ireland of 1652 called for a great deal of violence against the Catholics of Ireland. Section II of the Act states thusly: “II. That all and every Jesuit, priest, and other person or persons who have received orders from the Pope or See of Rome, or any authority derived from the same, that have any ways contrived, advised, counselled, promoted, continued, countenanced, aided, assisted, or abetted; or at any time hereafter shall any ways contrive, advise, counsel, promote, continue, countenance, aid, assist, or abet the rebellion or war in Ireland, or any the murders or massacres, robberies, or violences committed against the Protestants, English, or others there, be excepted from pardon for life and estate.” Here we have a near undeniable example of persecution of Catholics as many Catholic Priests were to lose both their lives and estates. The punishments went beyond Catholic Clergy as section VIII details the seizure of lands owned by Catholics in Ireland, “VIII. That all and every person and persons of the Popish Religion, who have resided in Ireland at any time from the first day of October, 1641, to the first of March, 1650, and have not manifested their constant good affection to the interest of the Commonwealth of England (the said persons not being comprehended in any of the former
qualifications), shall forfeit one third part of their estates in Ireland to the said Commonwealth, to be disposed of for the use, benefit, and advantage of the said Commonwealth; and the other two third parts of their respective estates or other lands, to the proportion or value thereof, to be assigned in such place in Ireland, as the Parliament, for the more effectual settlement of the peace of that nation, shall think fit to appoint for that purpose, be enjoyed by such person or persons, their heirs or assigns respectively: and that all other persons who have resided in Ireland within the time aforesaid, and have not been in actual service for the Parliament, or otherwise manifested their good affection to the interests of the Parliament of England, having opportunity to do the same, shall forfeit one fifth part of their estates to the use of the said Commonwealth."  

That was just the beginning of a great many laws restricting the freedoms of Catholics in Ireland. This did great harm to Ireland’s Catholics and could certainly be categorized as, “Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part” making genocide all the more valid as an accusation.

While the 17th Century English looked at the Irish with racism and disdain, this changed little over the next few hundred years. The Victorian era, beginning 185 years after Ireland’s subjugation still played host to a great deal of anti-Irish sentiments. Benjamin Disraeli, a man who would go on to serve as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1874 to 1880 once said, “[The Irish] hate our order, our civilization, our enterprising industry, our pure religion. This wild, reckless, indolent, uncertain and superstitious race have no sympathy with the English character. Their ideal of human felicity is an alternation of clannish broils and coarse idolatry. Their history describes an unbroken circle of bigotry and blood.” This shows the extent of anti-Irish feelings during the era when the Prime Minister holds such baleful thoughts toward people

6 August 12, 1652. Scobell, ii. 197. See Commonwealth and Protectorate, iv. 82-5.
under his rule. Historian Robert Blake, who studied the life of Benjamin Disraeli, wrote concerning Disraeli’s letters, “Throughout these letters Disraeli evinced a virulent racial and religious prejudice towards Ireland. This was, indeed, to be one of the least commendable features of Victorian politics, especially among the unenlightened masses who saw their standards threatened by hordes of alien papist immigrants accepting low wages and living in filthy conditions.” The people of Ireland, much like the people of Britain’s other colonies, were seen as lesser by the Victorian era English. Here we can see how the treatment of the Irish was similar to their colonial counterparts.

One particular facet of the Conquest of Ireland that is often ignored is the enslavement of the Irish. While generally slavery is associated with the British Empire’s African holdings, it occurred in Ireland, regardless of their being Caucasian Europeans. While Cromwell admitted to the sending of Irish prisoners to Barbados, Irish slavery is not a well-known occurrence. Although those Cromwell sent to Barbados were prisoners of war, this was not always the case, “Under Oliver Cromwell’s ethnic-cleansing policy in Ireland, unknown numbers of Catholic men, women and children were forcibly transported to the colonies. And it did not end with Cromwell; for at least another hundred years, forced transportation continued as a fact of life in Ireland.” Though technically they were indentured servants, many of them never saw the freedom they were supposed to earn.

With Ireland’s conquest, one could imagine that Ireland would flourish as an early addition to the one of the most powerful and expansive empires in history. This however, is far


from the truth. Ireland remained impoverished and inferior after its conquest. 77 years after Ireland’s capture, Jonathan Swift wrote a satirical piece illustrating English mistreatment of the Irish and Ireland’s rampant poverty. In *A Modest Proposal*, Jonathan Swift describes an apparently common sight of an Irish woman and her children begging for alms. He argues that as the mothers are forced to take care of their children they cannot work; growing up poor, these Irish children will go on to steal to survive, fight for England’s enemies, or find themselves working on plantations in Barbados in a manner just like that of a slave. Swift then suggests as a solution to Ireland’s problems that they simply eat their babies. This shocking argument is used to great ironic effect by Swift as it mocks dehumanizing attitudes held by the English toward the Irish. Swift wrote this to make a point that the English are that uncaring toward the Irish, which he proves with the neglect toward problems in Ireland. Swift cites the lack of help provided by the English, “for we can neither employ them in Handicraft, or Agriculture; we neither build Houses, (I mean in the Country) nor cultivate Land”\(^9\). He mentions a great many other things that could be done to solve Ireland’s issues in his paper, but concludes that it would be far easier to eat the Irish babies. Clearly this is evidence of English mistreatment of Ireland as we see complaints about the state of Ireland under English rule and the lack of action undertaken by the English a mere 77 years after Ireland was taken. The English have been accused of genocide due to the infamous Potato Famine that lasted from 1845 to 1852. Many would argue that this famine was the fault of the English and that the famine was caused by English policy in Ireland. John Mitchel in 1860 wrote, “I have called it an artificial famine: that is to say, it was a famine which desolated a rich and fertile island that produced every year abundance and superabundance to sustain all her people and many more. The English, indeed, call the famine a ‘dispensation of

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and ascribe it entirely to the blight on potatoes. But potatoes failed in like manner all over Europe; yet there was no famine save in Ireland. The British account of the matter, then, is first, a fraud; second, a blasphemy. The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine.”

Author Tim Coogan wrote an article titled, “Ireland’s Path to Desolation”; in it he argues that the English were to blame for the famine. Coogan claims that the English neglect toward Ireland contributed to the devastation caused by the Famine. The roads in Ireland were neglected, which prevented aid from reaching many parts of the country. The Whig government that presided at the time cancelled programs such as soup kitchens and food stockpiles which took away much needed aid during the famine. According to Coogan, the famine was used by the English in an effort to kill off the Irish by the Whigs and many others in England. What lends credence to his arguments is the British refusal to repeal the grain laws. These laws would have used the grain that was being exported from Ireland to England to feed the starving Irish. The English refused to do this because it would have resulted in a loss of money. This makes accusations of genocide against the English all the more plausible. A starving Ireland was left with very little help from the English, whose policy’s had caused the famine in the first place.

The English were not only responsible for genocide and persecution in their conquest of Ireland, but also allowed Ireland to continue to suffer under the Empire’s rule. Though the Irish were white Europeans, it did not stop the English from dehumanizing and developing highly

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racist attitudes toward the Irish, even to the point of enslaving them. The shared Christianity also
did little to nothing to prevent violence and oppression from the English. Catholics were
murdered and had many of their rights taken away under the English. The Catholicism of Ireland
made it much more of a victim to English brutality. The English not only allowed Ireland to
remain starving and impoverished, but continued to profit from it. The English neglected Irish
needs and allowed The Great Famine to whittle down Ireland’s population. England’s Whig
party even prevented ideas that would be used to help Ireland while it starved. The injustices
suffered by the Irish under the English yoke, much like the injustices suffered by many of
England’s other colonies, are a testament to the strength of its people. By understanding the
suffering that has happened in Ireland we can understand the motivations of terrorist groups such
as the Irish Republican Army, and those who right for Northern Ireland’s secession from the
United Kingdom or demand apologies and reparations from the British Government. This
knowledge can also be used to promote understanding for Ireland’s current status in the world.
Ireland like many other nations was crippled by colonization. The travails or Ireland can be seen
as an example of the evils of Colonialism and what it does to the nations it effects.
Bibliography


5. August 12, 1652. Scobell, ii. 197. See *Commonwealth and Protectorate*, iv. 82-5.


