

IRELAND: BACKGROUND PART ONE

In this special series JACK GALE breaks down the lies and distortions that surround the Irish question with a thorough examination of the history of class struggle in Ireland.

In every historical epoch the prevailing method of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, forms the basis upon which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of that epoch. —Karl Marx.

Landowners and peasants — clear class division

POLITICALLY, Ireland has been under the control of England for the past 700 years. What this has meant was explained by Lenin, in 'The British Liberals and Ireland' (1914):

'For centuries Britain has enslaved Ireland, doomed the Irish peasants to unparalleled suffering and gradual extinction from starvation, driven them from the land and compelled them to leave their native country in hundreds of thousands and millions...

'The unparalleled destitution and suffering of the Irish peasantry are an instructive example of the lengths to which the landlords and the Liberal bourgeoisie of a "dominant" nation will go. Britain largely based her "brilliant" economic development, the "prosperity" of her industry and commerce, on such exploits among the Irish peasantry as recall those of the Russian feudal (landlords).'

Until 1649 the social order that prevailed in England — the feudalism — had not replaced the tribal system in Ireland. So to the Irish, the struggle against the foreign aggressor was also a struggle against private property in land.

External

The English forcibly broke up the Irish clan system. This meant that the replacement of the communal ownership of land by a privately-owned system of capitalist-landlordism did not develop through the operation of internal economic forces, but via external military oppression.

Since the Irish aristocracy was either of foreign origin or in alliance with foreign oppression, the leadership of the Irish patriotic movement fell entirely into the hands of the middle class and, as such, became the idealized expression of middle-class interests.

The emphasis of this leadership has always been on a 'united national movement' which ignored the class interests of the Irish workers and peasants. Religion, language, patriotism, even political reform, have all been used to prevent the development of class consciousness by the working class.

For the last 150 years, every generation in Ireland has witnessed an attempted rebellion against English rule. The fighters in these rebellions have been the city workers and the rural poor.

But — apart from Larkin and Connolly — their leaders have consistently excluded the class interests of the poor from the aims to be achieved.

They sought, instead, to woo the Irish bourgeoisie to the national cause. Needless to say, this bourgeoisie clung stubbornly to its property under the protective powers of England.

Heroic

Ignoring the petty-bourgeois pleas for a 'union of classes' against England, the Irish aristocracy and bourgeoisie pursued their oppression of the Irish workers and peasants with a ruthlessness which threatened to depopulate the country.

While the Irish middle class produced many individual heroic patriots, in such movements as Young Ireland and the Fenians, they strove as a class to leave untouched the basis of national and economic subjection.

It is essential to grasp this in order to understand modern Irish history, which has been coloured for more than 300 years by the conflict between James II of England and William, Prince of Orange — the adventurer who claimed his throne.

Neither James nor William were concerned in the slightest about the needs of the Irish people. The Irish Catholics fought for James—but the reason is not hard to seek.

The Catholic noblemen and gentry possessed considerable property on which the peasantry had been reduced to impecunious tenants. They were the descendants of men who had confiscated their property as the spoils of conquest and they kept it as the fruits of co-operation with the foreign oppressor. In supporting James, they were acting as an English faction.

Despite their conflict with the Orangemen, they had one funda-

mental agreement with them—the Irish people should remain a subject people.

One thing, above all, must be understood — had the Jacobite forces defeated William of Orange, instead of the other way about, the lot of the Irish people would not have been improved one jot.

As James Connolly pointed out in his 'Labour in Ireland':

'They fought not for freedom for Ireland, nor for the restitution of their rights to the Irish people, but rather to secure that the class who then enjoyed the privilege of robbing the Irish people should not be compelled to give way in their turn to a fresh horde of land thieves.'

Connolly was right. The so-called "Patriot Parliament" of Dublin was itself a collection of land thieves and their lackeys.

By the same token, when William and his followers had finally secured victory in Ireland, they acted according to the same class feelings as their opponents. William confiscated 1½ million acres of Irish land and distributed it to the aristocratic plunderers who had supported him.

Common

Once the question of political supremacy was decided, both Protestant and Catholic tenants found themselves suffering one common oppression. Certainly, rich Catholics received much more "understanding" from the rich Protestants than the latter ever extended to their Protestant tenants and workers.

Few tears were shed by either Catholic or Protestant gentry over the fate of the poor of both denominations — as, for example, in the famine of 1740 when an estimated 400,000 people died. Moreover, the Irish landlords took full advantage of the aftermath of such famines to intensify evictions, break up small farms and seize village common lands.

The peasants fought back through secret societies which tore down the enclosures, killed

cattle, and burned the landlords' property.

In the S, these societies were known as 'Whiteboys' (because of the white shirts worn over their clothing on night raids) and their proclamations were frequently signed in the name of 'Queen Sive'. In the N they were known as 'Oakboys', 'Hearts of Steel' and 'Steelboys'.

Frequently, both Catholic and property owners combined to offer large rewards for the capture of members of these societies. And when caught they were savagely punished, suffering hanging, imprisonment or transportation.

The Irish parliament was always the representative body of the property owners. Its conflict with England was not in the interests of the Irish masses, but to protect its own spoils from their fellow-tyrants in England.

Central

The English ruling class, in its turn, was anxious to maintain control of Ireland in order to claim a share of the fruits of the toil of the Irish workers. So, the English sought to keep the Dublin parliament subordinate to the London parliament through what was known as Poyning's Law.

Passed in 1494, this made the Irish parliament incapable of meeting or discussing any measures without the previous approval of the King's Council. It was not repealed until 1782.

It is this that was the source of the 'patriotism' of the Irish ruling class—a patriotism which sought to rob the Irish people in the exclusive interests of a native-born band of oppressors.

These 'patriots' always claimed that the Legislative Union of Great Britain and Ireland (passed in 1800) destroyed Irish trade and that repeal of the Union would lead to prosperity. This was nonsense.

There was only one period in history when Irish manufacture was really prosperous. That was when inventions like Arkwright's water frame (1769), Hargreave's



An Irish linen print of 1782 showing the Volunteer militia which supported so-called 'Patriot Parliament' of Dublin—a collection of land thieves and their lackeys.

spinning jenny (1770) and Crompton's mechanical mule (1779)—plus a temporary period of free trade—led to a short-lived boom for the Irish linen and cotton industries.

But with the advance of capitalist production, particularly its dependence on coal, Irish industry was left behind. In 1830, for example, the one Scottish port of Dundee exported more linen than the whole of Ireland. Rapidly, all Irish industries declined—the leather trade, the woollen trade, the fishing industry, the iron trade, the milling trade, etc. etc.

In fact, it was not the Act of Union which weakened Irish capitalism, but the weakness of the Irish capitalist class which made possible the Act of Union. It was the decline of Irish industry which made possible the decline of the Irish parliament and not the other way about. (The Irish ruling class was so weak and vacillating that its parliamentary representatives openly accepted bribes to vote for the Act of Union.)

Property

This class was so treacherous that when a powerful military force, known as the Volunteers, was formed, the Irish capitalists, under the leadership of Henry Grattan, used it to pressurize the English government into granting commercial reforms, but then turned on the Volunteers when the latter strove for democratic reforms in Ireland.

Caught between the land-owning aristocracy on the one hand and the working masses on the other, the weak Irish capitalist class threw in its lot with the aristocracy.

At that time, Ireland was under the Penal Laws—statutes of unequalled ferocity ostensibly designed to convert Catholics to Protestantism. But in reality they were intended to convert Catholic-owned property into Protestant-owned property.

Catholics were debarred from all public office and most professions. Any member of a Catholic family could take possession of the family's entire property simply by making an affidavit that he embraced the Protestant religion.

Fixed prices were placed on certain items of property and any Protestant could claim the items from any Catholic by offering that price.

But class lines were ever stronger than religious lines. There are innumerable instances of the most fervent Orange landlords evicting Protestant tenants and letting the land to Catholics at higher rents.

Working-class Protestants suffered as much deprivation of democratic rights as did Catholics. Catholics were barred by

the religious laws and the Protestant poor by the property qualifications and the dominance of the Irish parliament by Pocket Boroughs (seats whose representatives were nominated by the land-owning aristocracy).

The three great grievances that concerned the Volunteers, then, were:

- (1) The English parliament had prohibited Irish trade with Europe and America except through an English port, thus crippling the development of Irish capitalism.
(2) Representation in the House of Commons in Dublin was denied alike to Protestant and Catholic workers and to all save a few Protestant capitalists and the nominees of the aristocracy.
(3) All Catholics suffered under religious disabilities.

The Volunteers, with arms in their hands, won free trade. But when they demanded popular representation in parliament, they were deserted by their own leaders.

When a Dublin Convention was called to plan a campaign for parliamentary reform, Volunteers' commander-in-chief Lord Charlemont repudiated the Convention and Henry Grattan denounced them in parliament as 'an armed rabble'.

When a second Convention was called, its instigators were arrested. The English government sent large forces of troops and the Volunteers, deserted by their leaders and abandoned by the capitalist class who had got what they wanted from them, were defeated without a blow.

Disarmed

The Volunteers, in fact, were organized on clear class lines.

There were three corps: the Liberty Corps, recruited entirely from the working class; the Merchants Corps, recruited from the capitalist class; and the Lawyers Corps, which speaks for itself. When the Irish government disarmed the Volunteers it did so by secret agreement with the Merchants and Lawyers Corps—but the Liberty Corps had to be disarmed forcibly.

The Irish working class, inspired by the success of the revolutionary movements in America and France, was ready to fight, but the Irish capitalist class feared the workers more than it feared the British government.

So the apparent gain when—after England had been weakened by the American War of Independence — Poyning's Law was repealed in 1782, was no real gain at all.

The real value of 1782 was assessed by one of Ireland's legendary heroes, Wolfe Tone:

'At one stroke it doubled the value of every borough-monger in the kingdom, left three-fourths of our countrymen slaves as it found them, and the government of Ireland in the base and wicked, and contemptible hands of those who had spent their lives in degrading and plundering her...'

'Who of the veteran enemies of the country lost his place or his pension? Who was called forth to station or office from the ranks of opposition? Not one.

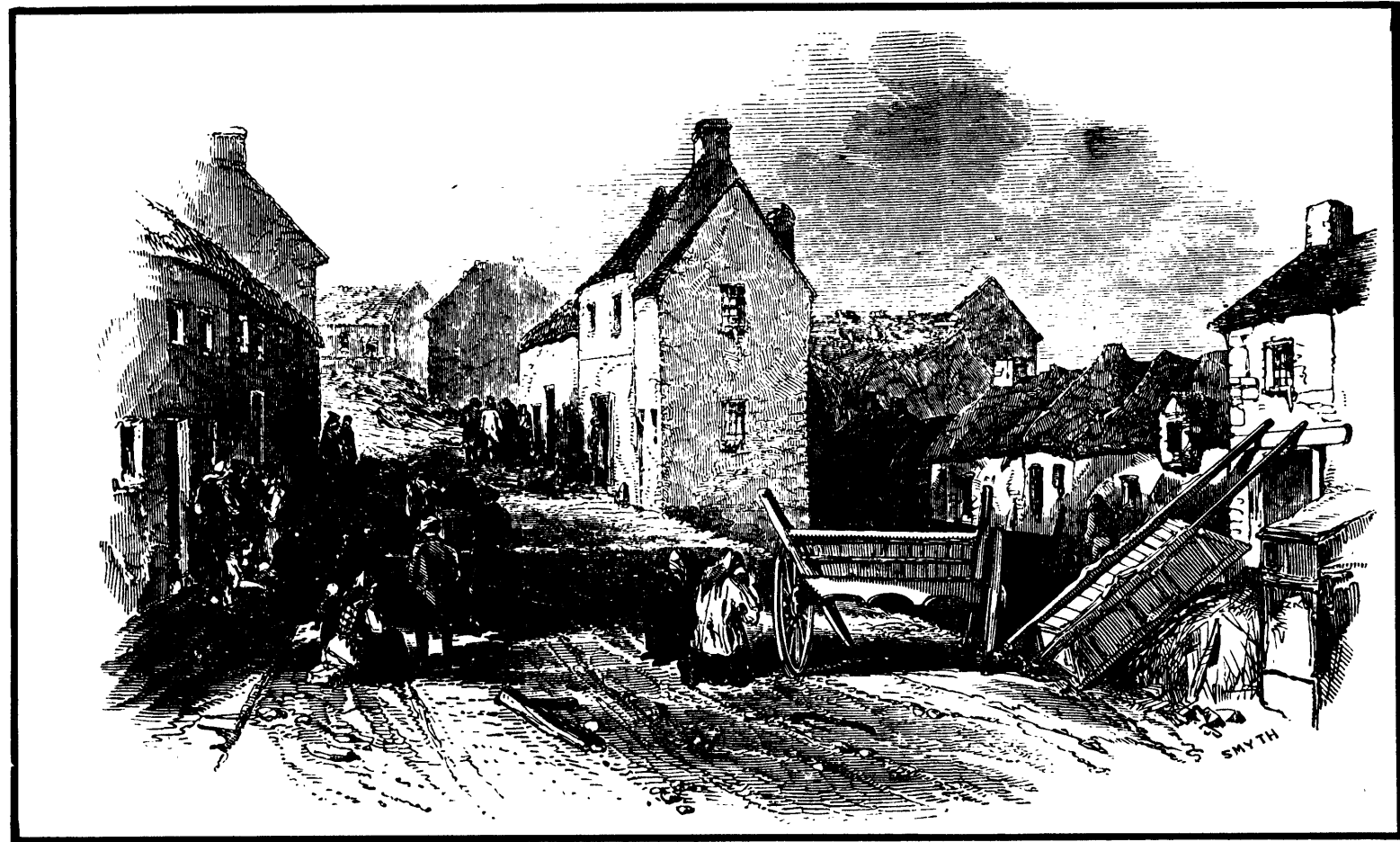
The power remained in the hands of our enemies, again to be exerted for our ruin, with

this difference, that formerly we had our distresses, our injuries, and our insults gratis at the hands of England; but now we pay very dearly to receive the same with aggravation, through the hands of Irishmen—yet this we boast of and call a Revolution.'

*Wolfe Tone 'An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland', 1791.

TOMORROW we will deal with the United Irishmen and the struggle for Home Rule — described by James Connolly as 'that abortive product of political intrigue'.

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Funeral of a famine victim in the early 19th century.

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