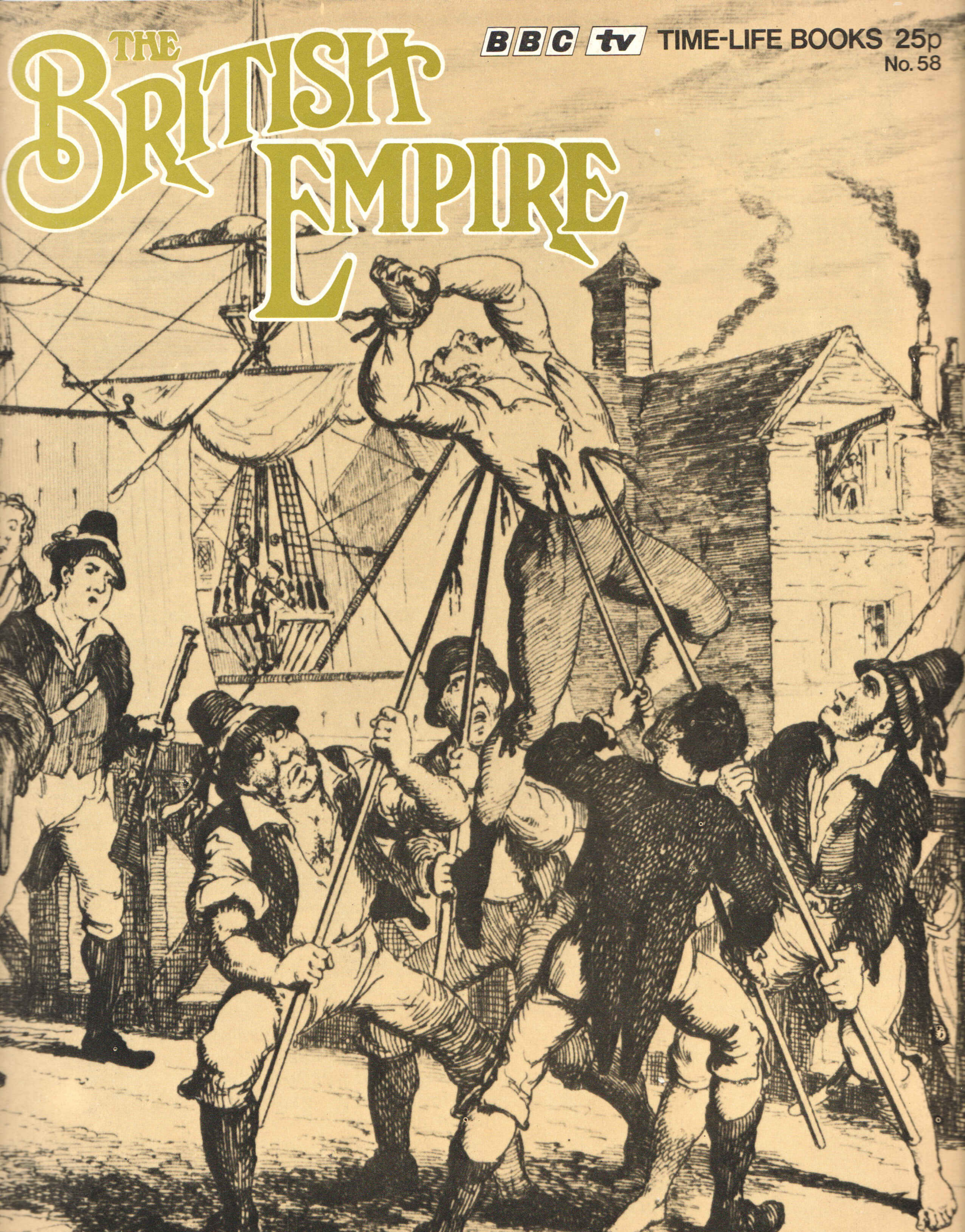
# THE BRITISH EMPIRE

BBC tv TIME-LIFE BOOKS 25p
No. 58



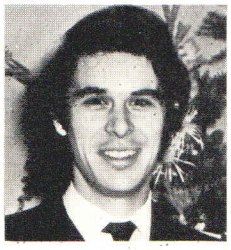
## IRELAND THE TORTURED COLONY

Australia & New Zealand 70c South Africa 70c Canada 95c

THE BRITISH EMPIRE

BBC tv TIME-LIFE BOOKS 25p
No. 58





**SIMON RIGGE,** who wrote this issue, was born in one small island colony, Bermuda, and lived for two years in another, Hong Kong. He read philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford University and has since worked on historical magazines in London. He was Executive Editor of Purnell's *History of the 20th Century*, for which he wrote a dozen articles, and is now a staff writer on *The British Empire*.

**Subscriptions** – These are available at £6·50 for six months, inclusive of postage and packing. For addresses outside of the United Kingdom, the rate is £8·75, inclusive of surface postage and packing.
**Back Numbers** – These are available at your local newsagent or may be secured by post for the inclusive price of 25p per issue. Be sure and specify which issue(s) you desire.
Orders for both subscriptions and back numbers should be sent, with remittance, to *The British Empire*, BBC Publications, 35 Marylebone High St., London W1M 4AA.
**Binders** – These may be ordered at £1·05 for the Standard edition and £1·75 for the Deluxe edition, either individually or on subscription. Orders, with remittance, should be sent to *British Empire Binders*, BBC Publications, P.O. Box No. 126, London SE1 5JZ.
**NOTE:** All above payments should be by crossed cheque/P.O.

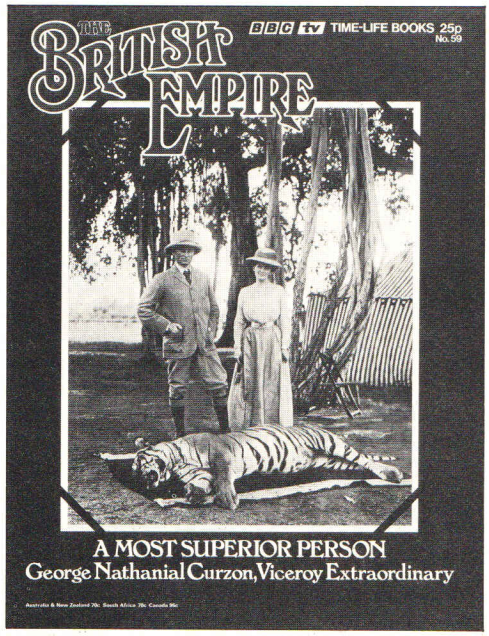
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:** (*t*=top; *b*=bottom; *l*=left; *r*=right; *c*=centre). Cover: Trustees of the British Museum. Inside back cover: National Maritime Museum, London. Trustees of the British Museum 1599; John Johnson Collection, New Bodleian Library, Oxford 1597, 1614/15; Lambeth Palace Library 1600; Mansell Collection 1602*l*, 1621*b*; National Museum of Ireland, Dublin 1623*t*; National Portrait Gallery, London 1601; Radio Times Hulton Picture Library 1603/4, 1607–13, 1620/1 (except 1621*b*), 1622*t*, 1622*c*; Topix 1618/19, 1622/3. PHOTOGRAPHERS: Eileen Tweedy cover, 1597, 1599, 1614/15, inside back cover.

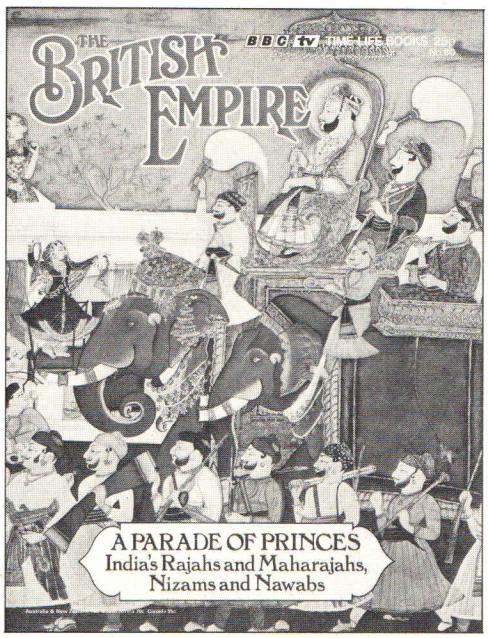


Published by Time-Life International (Nederland) B.V. in co-operation with the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Distributed in the U.K. by Time-Life International Ltd. and BBC Publications.

Printed in England by Jarrold and Sons Ltd. Norwich.




## CONTENTS



**Cover:** Rebel Irish Catholics jerk their pikes into a Protestant loyalist on Wexford Bridge during the Insurrection of 1798, when Ireland tortured herself with social, religious and racial divisions.

# IRELAND
# THE TORTURED COLONY


Haunted by colonial horrors, Gladstone carries Britannia towards National Disaster on that dangerous nag, Irish Home Rule.

**Ireland was Britain's first colony. She was also the closest to home, the most puzzling and the most troublesome. By the time of the Home Rule crisis in the 1880s (above), Irish nationalism was casting a deeper gloom over British politics than the death of Gordon at Khartoum or the Boer victory at Majuba Hill. But this was only the latest – and not the last – in a long series of Irish troubles. For the underlying themes of 750 years of Anglo-Irish history, picked out by this issue, led inexorably to chronic civil strife. Britain's failure to control Ireland effectively, and Ireland's failure to overcome her own divisions, created the torture of a colony perpetually at odds with the mother country and at war with herself ☘**

by Simon Rigge

The symbol of Britain's long presence in Ireland is a gloomy castle. Walk up Cork Hill in Dublin, a steep little street twisting up above the River Liffey, and you come upon it suddenly, almost hidden by the surrounding buildings. The entrance is a sombre stone gateway surmounted by the figure of Justice; within, there are two medium-sized courtyards boxed in by a haphazard variety of buildings in Classical, Gothic and Queen Anne styles; all around, rows of glowering windows hide minor government offices. That is Dublin Castle. It is a structure without plan or unity. Through its long history, it has been almost constantly under repair.

For over seven centuries this gloomy castle was the palace of the Viceroys of Ireland who, as "vice-kings," fulfilled all the functions of royal government on behalf of the King of England. Known usually by the innocuous title of "Lord Leff*nent*" – in the brogue – they were in fact colonial governors with most of the powers of a king and prime minister combined. Not only did they perform the ceremonial functions of head of state – "drowning the shamrock" on St. Patrick's Day, attending horse shows, bestowing the viceregal kiss on the debutantes – but they also summoned or prorogued Irish parliaments; they were usually Commander-in-Chief of the army; and from their dirty and badly furnished offices in Upper Castle Yard, they directed the whole administration of the country. In Ireland, the word "Kestle" meant the British government.

This gloomy castle is a fitting symbol of the British presence in Ireland. Like the castle, British rule was a ramshackle structure without plan or unity, and almost constantly under repair. The twin pillars on which it rested – conquest and colonization – were never wholly sound. Almost the entire sweep of Ireland's colonial history – 750 years – is a chronicle of Britain's failure to win complete control. Across three great swathes of time – four centuries of conquest, two centuries of Protestant colonization, the 19th-Century age of nationalism – this theme remained constant. The result was an endemic state of upheaval which the bewildered Victorians christened the Irish Question; it was a question to which they had no answer.

The explanation for Ireland's chaos lay in her chameleon nature, for during her long and tortuous history, she was constantly changing her colours: at one moment, she was a European nation proud of her ancient traditions; at another, a colony in the British Empire; at yet another, an integral part of the United Kingdom. Her geographical position across the Irish Sea placed her too far away for complete integration, and too close for complete independence. Ireland became a country with a split personality, half nation and half colony, and that was why she ended in a state of war with herself and with the mother country.

It was a consequence of her close proximity to the mainland that Ireland became Britain's first colony. In 1167, a mere century after the Norman victory at Hastings, an expedition of Anglo-Norman barons crossed the Irish Sea with visions of rich lands in their minds, a mandate from Henry II in their hands and the blessing of the Pope in their souls. Their mission was to conquer Ireland.

The leader of the expedition was an Irishman, Dermot MacMurrough, formerly King of Leinster, one of the five ancient kingdoms of Ireland. Outmanœuvred in the chaotic and nefarious tribal politics of Ireland, MacMurrough fled to England. He quickly won support from the politic and ambitious Henry II, who had thoughtfully obtained a papal bull from Pope Adrian IV authorizing him to conquer Ireland and rectify what was then accepted as the barbaric state of Irish morals and religion. With his Norman allies Dermot MacMurrough won back the Kingship of Leinster and soon took Dublin.

But he was merely the spearhead of a general Norman invasion. In 1171 Henry II came over in person with an army of 4,000 men and the following year the new Pope, Alexander III, recognized the King of England as Lord of Ireland. Thus Ireland became England's first colony by the ironic combination of Irish leadership, Norman militarism and papal encouragement. The invaders began to settle in.

But very soon things began to go wrong. One Easter Monday, hardly more than 30 years after the arrival of the first conquerors, there was a sanguinary warning of trouble. Five hundred citizens of Bristol, to which city Henry had "presented" Dublin, crossed over to view their property. As they were enjoying a little sightseeing, a horde of wild, dispossessed Irishmen descended on the city from the hills. What happened then, none of the Bristol holidaymakers lived to tell. It was as a result of this incident, in 1205, that Dublin Castle was begun.

The Irish, as the English now discovered to their cost, were a warlike people and, despite their chronic disunity and internecine feuds, they proved remarkably resistant to effective conquest. Their own way of life, their language, their laws and their bardic folklore did not easily wither at the touch of Norman feudalism. The leaders of society – princes, abbots and scribes – continued to cultivate "wisdom and knowledge and booklore," as a contemporary writer put it. They looked back to their own Gaelic traditions, to the Golden Age of the mid-9th Century, when Irish learning was admired throughout Europe. Through all the vicissitudes of Ireland's troubled history, this Gaelic heritage never faded completely, and to Irish patriots centuries later it became a badge of national identity, to be worn with pride and emotion.

So resilient were the Irish that over the next two centuries the Anglo-Norman conquest became a shadow of its former self. English power resided at Dublin Castle and nominally extended to the whole of Ireland. But in practice the King's writ did not run outside walled towns and a narrow strip of land on the east coast, running from Dundalk in the north to little further south than Dublin. This area was known as "the obedient shires" or "the English Pale."

Worse still, the Norman colonists, on whom the English Crown depended for the control of Ireland – the de Burghs, the Butlers, the Fitzgeralds – were going native. They were becoming, said the contemporary chronicler, Giraldus Cambrensis, in a famous phrase, "hibernicis ipsis hiberniores" – more Irish than the Irish themselves. In 1366, in an Irish parliament summoned at Kilkenny, the Lord Lieutenant passed a total of 35 statutes that prohibited the colonists from wearing Irish dress, following Irish

customs, marrying Irish heiresses or even entertaining Irish minstrels, poets or story-tellers. These famous Statutes of Kilkenny were an admission that the conquest of Ireland had failed. They were also totally ineffective.

By the middle of the 15th Century, English control had almost vanished. Ireland was governed, not by the King of England, but by the great Anglo-Norman family of Fitzgerald, Earls of Kildare. By the late 1470s, this family was passing the all-powerful office of Viceroy from father to son like a royal dynasty. The Irish Sea might have been an ocean, so far apart did England and Ireland drift.

Not until the Tudors came to power in 1485 did the English Crown tackle the problem of regaining control in Ireland. There was no easy solution. Direct rule from England, through English officials backed by English troops, would be expensive. Indirect rule, through Hibernicized Anglo-Normans like the powerful Earl of Kildare, might allow Ireland to drift right out of English control.

Henry VII opted for indirect rule. But his domineering son, Henry VIII, gave himself no option but to choose direct rule. He antagonized the Kildare family. He broke with Rome. And he provoked the Pope's allies, chiefly France and Spain, into probing for Protestant England's weaknesses: the most obvious weakness was the potential offshore base of Ireland, which remained staunchly Roman Catholic.

In 1534 a full-scale rebellion broke out. It was led by the Kildares, hailed by the friars as a holy war against the heretic King and encouraged by Spanish agents. Henry crushed it with unparalleled severity. By 1540, the House of Kildare was shattered. An Irish parliament obediently enacted the ecclesiastical legislation of the English Reformation and "most willingly and joyously" conferred on Henry the title King of Ireland, in place of the "Lord" of Ireland previously bestowed on Henry II by the Pope.

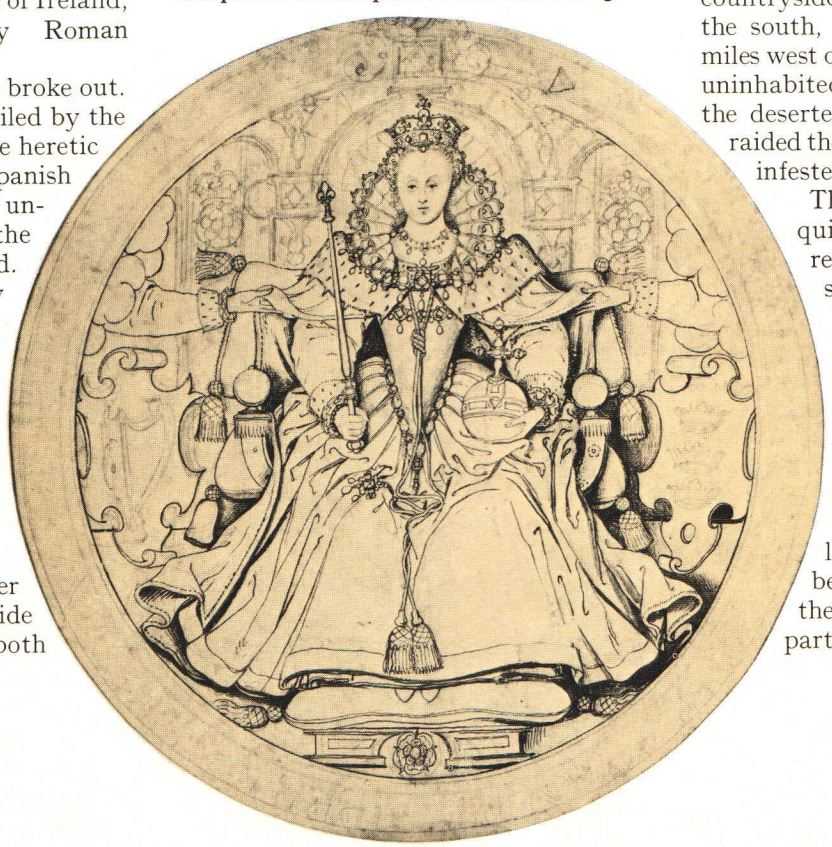
But it was only a paper victory for the Crown. Outside the Pale, the magnates, both native Irish and Anglo-Norman in origin, were still powerful and they now nurtured the hope of foreign aid. For her own safety, England could no longer risk the two countries drifting apart.

The pattern of Irish history had been set. There could be no going back. Now, with the House of Kildare broken and no one to take their place, indirect rule – rule on the cheap – was impossible. In future Ireland would have to be ruled by an Englishman, backed by an English army. And that would be prohibitively expensive. From this dilemma was born a fatally ineffective policy of coercion and conciliation: coercion to put down rebellion, conciliation to cut costs.

As an immediate consequence, Henry's daughter, Elizabeth, was threatened by four Irish rebellions, all involving the risk and two the reality of foreign intervention. Regarded as illegitimate by Catholics, who wished to see her deposed, desperately insecure on her throne, she crushed them ruthlessly.

The last rebellion Elizabeth faced was the most serious. It broke out in Ulster which, cut off by mountains and lakes in the north, had escaped the Anglo-Norman conquest almost completely. Led by "Red" Hugh O'Neill, the rebellion spread throughout Ireland in 1598, and in 1601 4,000 Spanish troops briefly joined the rebel side. Fortunately, in Lord Mountjoy Elizabeth had an excellent commander. On March 30, 1603, O'Neill accepted defeat and knelt in submission.

**A design for a great seal to be used on Irish state papers bears the imperial figure of Elizabeth I, whose armies nominally completed the conquest of Ireland in 1603.**



The first great period of Anglo-Irish history was over. At last, the long-lingering conquest seemed completed. The country that a 16th-Century Irish poet rightly called a "sword-land" was soon to be united under the English civil government of Dublin Castle. In sad recognition of this, Hugh O'Neill and his companion in arms, Rory O'Donnell, who had both been pardoned and were now Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell, sailed away in a secretly hired ship from Lough Swilly, never to return. This event in the autumn of 1607 became known as the "Flight of the Earls" and to Gaelic Ulster it was a disaster greater than the surrender to Mountjoy four years before. "Woe to the heart that meditated," bewailed a contemporary writer, "woe to the mind that conceived . . . this voyage."

For Irishmen who lived through these events, the sense of finality must have been reinforced by the devastation of their war-torn country. Churches and castles lay in ruins; the cattle were dead, the crops burnt. Plague swept the land, emptied the cities and depopulated the countryside. Ulster was a wilderness, and the south, too, was devastated. For 60 miles west of Cork the country was almost uninhabited. Wolves hungrily roamed the deserted wastes of Munster. Pirates raided the southern shores and brigands infested the interior.

This vision of the Apocalypse quickly faded with economic recovery, and the Ireland described by Mountjoy as "one of the goodliest provinces of the world . . . abounding with all the sustenance of life, as corn, cattle, fish and fowl" soon reappeared, phoenix-like from the ashes.

Far more long-lasting were the social and political problems. Even now, despite Elizabeth's tough coercive measures, the conquest of Ireland was only partial. Though the old Gaelic

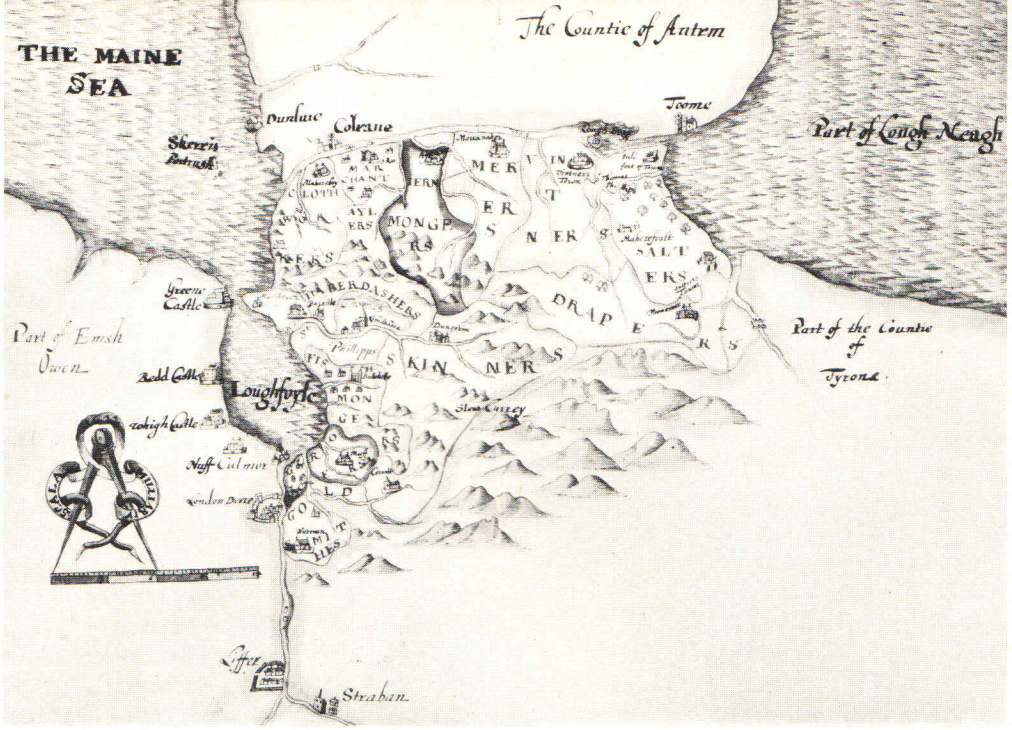
order had received a mortal blow, the native population was no less hostile for the loss of their leaders and the English still regarded them as "Irish enemies." To men of the time, there was a simple solution: replace the disloyal natives by loyal settlers; establish "plantations" or colonies. Ireland would not be safe or happy until the people, as Sir John Davies, Irish Attorney General, put it, "in tongue and heart and everyway else become English, so as there will be no difference or distinction but the Irish Sea betwixt us."

The estates of Tyrone and Tyrconell were declared forfeit to the Crown and six of the nine counties of Ulster lay open to colonization. The bulk of the lands were assigned to contractors, known as "undertakers," who were required to bring over English and Scottish settlers and "plant" them in Ulster in easily defended, solidly built villages or towns. The undertakers were not allowed to accept Irish tenants.

At first, the plan did not work well. The undertakers had difficulty finding sufficient numbers of settlers and, anxious for quick profits, accepted Irish tenants instead. No rapid change in the population took place, and instead of forming compact, easily defended islands of Britishness, the settlers were scattered piecemeal through a mainly Gaelic population.

To help the programme, the City of London was invited to plant colonies in the county of Coleraine and to rebuild its two main towns, Coleraine and Derry. By April, 1610, they had formed a joint-stock company and sent over 200 workmen to begin rebuilding work. Derry was renamed Londonderry, and gave its name to the whole county; other towns were named after the City companies which founded them. Names like Draperstown and Salterstown, for example, survive as a permanent monument to the plantation policy of the early British Empire.

Scots made up a large proportion of the London companies' tenants and they also took over a large part of Donegal. But it was in Antrim and Down, conveniently close to the Scottish lowlands, that they made their greatest contribution to the repeopling of Ulster. They brought with them livestock, new towns, new prosperity, new customs and their own Presbyterian religion.




The first plantations of English and Scottish settlers made a deep impression on Ireland, but they were not enough to create another Britain, and in 1615, lands were confiscated for colonization all over Ireland. But tough measures of this sort tended, not to reduce, but to double the problems of government. For they hastened the division of the country into two nations, one native and Catholic and the other Anglo-Scottish and Protestant.

Land and religion thus became the burning question in Ireland. The confiscation of land for plantations naturally alarmed existing landholders, who included not only the mass of the Gaelic people but also the Old English of the Pale. Both these groups had remained Catholic almost to a man after Henry VIII's break with Rome. Therefore, any attempt to step up the plantations policy and any campaign to enforce the reformed faith, Anglicanism, could have the disastrous consequence of uniting both these groups against the government of Dublin Castle.

The difficulties of trying to rule two nations at once quickly became apparent. To conciliate the one aroused the anger of the other. And Irish Protestants showed themselves easily aroused. One Sunday in April, 1627, the Bishop of Londonderry preached a sermon on the text "That we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies might serve Him without Fear." Then he called on the congregation to say Amen, and "suddenly the whole church almost shaked with the great sound their loud Amens made." It was a chilling omen for Ireland's future.

In 1641, the enforcement of extreme Protestant policies demonstrated how dangerous the division of Ireland had become. Charles I appointed the Earl of Leicester Viceroy, but he held the post *in absentia* and real power passed into the hands of two Lords Justices. They were Puritans. In August they halted all semblance of conciliation, whether in questions of religion or land, towards "Papists and rebels." Within a month, Ireland was plunged into religious war.

At about ten o'clock in the evening of Saturday, October 23, 1641, the inhabitants of Belfast were startled to see the glow of several big fires, away to the south-west. The native Irish had broken into sudden insurrection. Dungannon, Charlemont and Newry had already fallen. The fires were at Lisburn, barely ten miles away, lit by the rebels to guide their supporters to the town. The Ulster Rising had begun.

It spread rapidly through Ireland. Many Protestant settlers were slaughtered in the first heat, others taken prisoner and then murdered. Thousands were driven from their homes, stripped almost naked. After some hesitation, the Old English joined their fellow Catholics in revolt. Protestant refugees fled to England, where their plight caused a wave of revulsion. By February, 1642, all but a few areas of Ireland were in Catholic hands.

In 1649, after the execution of Charles I at Whitehall, Oliver Cromwell, military commander of the Commonwealth of England, arrived in Ireland with 3,000 of his Ironsides to complete mopping-up

**William III, Prince of Orange, has been the hero of Irish Protestants ever since he defeated the Catholics at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and, in the words of the Orangemen's toast, "saved us all from popery."**

**A map drawn soon after 1610 shows how the county of Coleraine, renamed Londonderry, was divided among Protestant settlers of the 12 City companies of London. (The new town of "London Derie" appears next to the scale.)**

operations against his enemies – whether Catholic or royalist – in all parts of the British Isles. In the middle of August he took Dublin, and on September 11, in one of the most notorious events of Irish history, he stormed and sacked the town of Drogheda, about 30 miles north of the capital. Almost the entire rebel garrison and all Catholic clergy who could be found were massacred, and no doubt many townspeople perished also. It was supposed to be retribution for the Irish massacres of 1641, in which the majority of victims had been Protestants. In fact the bulk of those who paid for Ireland's sins were not Irish at all, but English royalists who formed the backbone of the garrison.

By 1652, the Cromwellian reconquest was almost complete. Ireland lay helpless in the power of the Puritan English Parliament. Once again, after ten years' war, the country was desolate. Once again the shaky structure of British rule had to be repaired. According to the conventional wisdom, the solution was to create more plantations.

The Act of Settlement, passed in August, 1652, outlined the plan. All rebels – "delinquents" they were termed – lost their lands outright. All the best land – east of the Shannon – went to Protestant settlers, mostly disbanded Cromwellian soldiers and "adventurers" who had advanced money to Parliament in 1642 on the promise of repayment later in confiscated Irish estates. In 1641, on the eve of the Ulster Rising, the Catholics had held about three-fifths of the land of Ireland. Just over ten years later, they owned about one-fifth. A landed ruling class, mainly English and Scottish in origin and Protestant in religion, had been set up to dominate the rest of the population, mainly Irish in origin and Catholic in religion.

The twin pillars on which English rule rested – conquest and colonization – had both been repaired and reinforced by Cromwell's coercive settlement. For over 30 years, right through the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the reign of Charles II, Ireland remained quiet.

But in 1685, Charles's brother, James II, came out with what he called his "Catholic design," a policy to secure freedom of worship for the downtrodden "papists." Within three years it was to prove disastrous.

In 1687 James appointed a Catholic, Richard Talbot, Earl of Tyrconnell, as Lord Lieutenant – "to the astonishment of all sober men," recorded the diarist John Evelyn, "and to the evident ruin of the Protestants in that Kingdom." A popular song called "Lillibulero" spread alarm among all classes of Protestants. One verse, referring to the new Lord Lieutenant, ran:

*Ho by my soul it is a Talbot*
*Lillibulero bullen-a-la*
*And he will cut all de English throat*
*Lillibulero bullen-a-la.*

Tyrconnell filled the army, the administration and the judiciary with Catholics and appointed Catholic sheriffs to almost every county. A stream of Protestant refugees fled to England where, as in 1641, their arrival caused a wave of anti-Catholic revulsion. When Tyrconnell sent over his newly constituted Catholic army to support James, Englishmen trembled for their Protestant constitution. In consequence, an invitation was dispatched to William of Orange to come over and save England from Catholic tyranny. William accepted and landed at Torbay in November, 1688. In December James threw the Great Seal, instrument of royal authority, into the Thames and fled to France. The "Glorious Revolution," so known because it was bloodless, was over.

But what hope was there for a bloodless revolution in Ireland where the Lord Lieutenant, Tyrconnell, still held out for Catholic James? James himself arrived from France to take over the Catholic kingdom of Ireland, and to continue by force of arms the struggle he had given up in England. In Dublin, a "patriot parliament," almost entirely Catholic and predominantly Old English in membership, drew up a programme to extirpate the Protestant settler interest from Ireland. It was a programme that only military victory could enforce.

In April, James laid siege to Londonderry, Protestant stronghold of the north. For 15 weeks the city held out. Thousands of inhabitants died of starvation before an English fleet broke through, forcing the disheartened Jacobite army to retreat south towards Dublin.

The decisive battle of modern Ireland was fought a year later. William of Orange, now crowned William III of England, had arrived to re-establish the

continued on p. 1604

# THE HORROR OF 1798

In the famous "98," the disastrous attempt by Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen to create a French Revolution in Ireland, all the grisly realities of a divided people were exposed. Hatred answered hatred as class war, colonial war, religious war fused in a double horror of rebel terror and brutal repression.

The chief weapon of '98 was the pike, easily forged by blacksmiths and easily buried for concealment. Searching for pikes, loyalist troops flogged suspects, half-hanged them or gave them the "pitch-cap" by rubbing pitch on their heads, adding gunpowder and setting the mixture alight. The rebels responded with a drunken orgy of killing, tossing their writhing victims from one to another on the points of their pikes. At the Kildare town of Prosperous, they piked almost the entire garrison in this way, shot the captain with a blunderbuss and burned his body in a barrel of tar. By the end of the '98, 30,000 Irish men, women and children were dead.

Troops leap to a ghastly death from Prosperous's blazing barracks.

In an emotive loyalist engraving, "United dogs" waving the green flag of the

Irish republic vent their revolutionary anger on a "Loyal Little Drummer" aged 12 who boldly refused to beat the King's drum for rebels.

Protestant kingdom of Ireland. James, reinforced by 7,000 French troops sent by Louis XIV, decided to defend the line of the Boyne, the river that flows into the Irish Sea at Drogheda, on the old northern boundary of the English Pale.

On Tuesday, July 1, 1690, the two armies met for the Battle of the Boyne. It was not a hard-fought struggle. After a heavy bombardment, William's forces soon managed to cross the river. Although James's cavalry fought well, his infantry did not, and quickly broke and fled. The ex-King gave up and retreated. By the end of the day it was all over.

Though militarily a petty event, the Battle of the Boyne was a crucial turning-point. The strength of the Catholic nobles and gentry, both Irish and Old English, which had survived the Elizabethan conquest in 1603 and had not been extinguished by the Cromwellian settlements in 1652, was at last doomed.

Nearly one million acres of rebel-owned land were confiscated, leaving only one-seventh of the kingdom in Catholic hands. Over 10,000 defeated Irish troops sailed away into exile on the Continent. This exodus, known as the "Flight of the Wild Geese," continued for generations, carrying off men of birth and ability to fight as mercenaries in continental armies. It marked the end of the old Gaelic tradition and the collapse of Catholic resistance for over a century.

Although, like all other English Kings to date, William III was prepared to offer the Catholics a measure of toleration, he was outflanked by the hardline Irish Protestants. They were understandably in no mood for toleration. They were still recovering from the second major, and nearly successful, assault on their power and property within one century, and they still faced the dangers of "rapparees" (armed brigands from the disbanded Jacobite Army), French privateer raids and a possible French invasion. In their view they had been "delivered out of the hands of their enemies" and were far too nervous to entrust those hands – Jacobite hands – with any sort of power again. For them King William III was not just the new King of England, but "the deliverer."

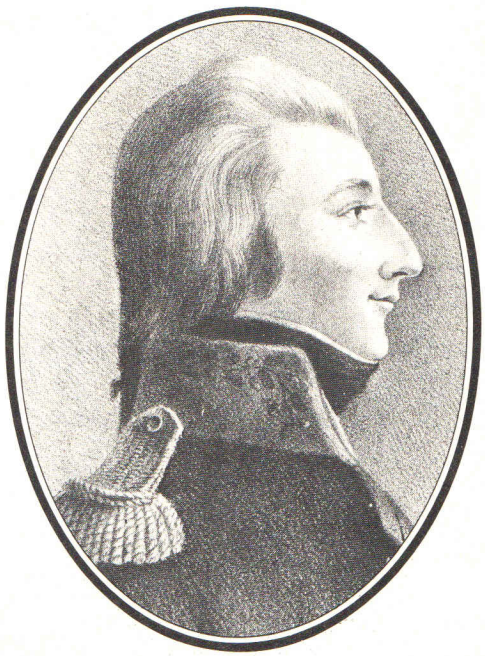
The worshippers, in their fear and enthusiasm, foisted on their idol what Edmund Burke called "as wise and elaborate contrivance for the impoverishment and degradation of the people as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man." It was a penal code against Catholics, designed to exclude them utterly from power. Between 1692 and the 1720s, penal laws were passed in the Irish parliament which forbade Catholics to sit in the chamber or vote in parliamentary elections; to join the bar, the bench, Ireland's one university (Trinity College, Dublin), the navy or any public bodies; to run a school or send their children for a Catholic education abroad; to bear arms, to marry a Protestant, to buy, inherit or in any way receive land, to hold leases of more than 31 years, to have more than two apprentices (except in the linen trade) or even to own a horse worth more than £5. And any Protestant could force a Catholic to "sell" his horse for £5.

Special privileges were given to any member of a Catholic family who turned Protestant. By changing his religion, an eldest son could more or less dispossess his father. To convert a Protestant to Catholicism, on the other hand, was a capital offence. Senior Catholic clergy were banished; if they returned, they could be hanged, drawn and quartered.

For control of Ireland, Britain was now dependent on a fearful, arrogant minority group whose crude religious apartheid she distrusted but whose power as a colonial garrison she dared not challenge. This tight ruling class, which rightly became known as the Protestant Ascendancy, survived more or less intact for two centuries. Right into the Victorian age, the history of Ireland is the history of the Protestants – the Anglo-Irish as they were known – and their growing sense of identity with the country in which they had settled.

Their wealth and power rested upon land, the green and fertile land of Ireland snatched from the Gaelic people by conquest and colonization. Land accommodated tenants, and tenants provided feudal services – as labourers and soldiers – or paid tithes to the Church, taxes to the government and rent to the landlord. In 18th-Century Ireland, six out of seven landlords were Protestants.

The system was harsh to the Irish peasants. Despite the richness of the land,



**Wolfe Tone, as leader of the Insurrection of 1798, made the first attempt to set up an independent Irish republic and so became the father of Irish nationalism.**

travellers in Ireland almost always commented on its poverty. "I never saw greater appearance of misery," wrote a Mrs. Mary Delany, who spent most of her time light-heartedly doing the social round, from one great country house to another. "The poverty of the people as I passed through the country has made my heart ache." The towns swarmed with beggars and the peasantry lived in cabins hardly better than English pigsties.

The colonial status of Ireland was at least partly to blame. The landed classes of the 18th Century, who owned the largest Irish estates, regarded Ireland as a savage, uncivilized country. Only a few settled in Ireland, setting a style of country-house magnificence and patronizing the arts. The rest felt it was no less than "permanent exile" to reside across the Irish Sea. The Earl of Bristol, who had been appointed Viceroy, even resigned halfway across when he heard what conditions were like on the other side. Most of the aristocrats preferred to live in England, letting out their Irish estates to middlemen and drawing the rent. By 1779, when the total annual revenue of Ireland was barely more than £1,000,000, £732,000 a year was being drawn out of the country by absentee landlords. Lack of capital became one of the gravest problems of the Irish economy.

Meanwhile, the middlemen subdivided what they had obtained wholesale, so to speak, and sublet at retail prices until the actual tiller of the soil supported a great, top-heavy system of idlers and skivers, paid a crippling rent and had almost no security of tenure.

The lesser landlords, the resident Anglo-Irish gentry who formed the backbone of the Protestant Ascendancy, were no more beneficial to Ireland. They had no sympathy for their Irish tenants, from whom they were cut off by religion and memories of the 17th-Century risings. As a class, they were, in the words of one angry observer, "lazy, trifling, negligent, *slobbering*, profligate." Drinking smuggled claret and potheen – illicitly distilled whiskey – and indulging in field-sports were their chief activities. Most of them lived far beyond their means.

Yet the condition of Ireland was not just the fault of improvident, rapacious landlords. The evils of the system were greatly increased by the distorted development of the Irish economy. Apart from linen manufacturing in the north, the only branch of industry in Ireland which did really well was the export of cattle products and, to a lesser extent, the wool trade. This led to a great expansion of pastureland, which was fine for the landlords and middlemen who took the profits from the flocks and herds but disastrous for the ordinary tenant farmers raising their crops. They were squeezed into an area of land that grew smaller and smaller right up to the 1780s. To make matters worse, a combination of factors that is still controversial caused the population almost to double over the period. Smallholdings were subdivided and subdivided again; and an ever-increasing number of the Irish people sank to subsistence level, existing on potatoes and buttermilk, with a salt herring or a piece of bacon on very rare occasions. Irish agriculture had become dangerously unbalanced, as serious famines in 1730 and 1740 showed. By the 1760s, agrarian violence was beginning to disturb the Irish nights, as bands of desperate men roamed the countryside, destroying property, killing cattle and torturing the victims of their displeasure.

These men represented the mass of the Irish people, the hidden Ireland of Gaelic folklore and legend, suppressed but not destroyed by the Protestant Ascendancy, inspired by memories of past struggles, dreaming of a resurrection for their vanished glories.

At least some of the blame for this dangerous state of affairs rested with Britain. Although Ireland lacked the capital, skilled labour and resources for economic development, British trade restrictions made it less likely that such disabilities would be overcome. Powerful British interests jealous of Irish competition – wool manufacturers, Scottish linen-weavers, brewers, glassmakers – successfully lobbied the Westminster Parliament to prohibit Irish exports to Britain or even to any country whatsoever. Irish wool had to be smuggled out to France or not exported at all.

In addition, the British Crown used Dublin Castle as a kind of political dustbin. The first two Georges off-loaded their mistresses, bastards and German relations and dependants on to the Irish pension list, and used Irish sinecure offices to bribe or reward English politicians, who then drew the salaries and discharged the duties of the office, if any, in their absence. By the 1770s pensioners and sinecure holders were probably costing Ireland about £100,000 a year, about ten per cent of the annual revenue. The practice extended to the Church and the law.

The Anglo-Irish gentry, who might otherwise have found their younger sons employment in these professions, were forced to support them off the land. They had no option but to rack their tenants, the already impoverished tillers of the soil, for yet more money.

The Protestant Ascendancy rebelled against these restrictions and in the process began to create their own national feeling. The arena in which they fought was the magnificent new parliament building, opened in College Green in 1729. There, among the landowners who sat as M.P.s for Ireland, a nucleus of opposition to the policies of Dublin Castle grew and multiplied. Its members were known as the Patriots. Though loyal to the English Crown, they demanded parliamentary autonomy as a means of removing Britain's trade restrictions and other abuses. Their stand was powerfully supported by Jonathan Swift, whose bellicose pamphlets played a crucial part in awakening Protestant nationalism. "By the laws of God, of nature, of nations, and of your own country," he declared, "you are and ought to be as free a people as your brethren in England." With the growth of popular journalism like Swift's, the Patriots won the support of the growing Protestant middle class – mainly Presbyterians of Ulster – and even of Catholics who, since trade was one of the few activities from which they were not debarred by the penal laws, now included a strong merchant interest keen to see the last of the trade restrictions.

The Patriots soon scored two notable victories. In 1725 they quashed a patent for coining Irish currency which had been granted to a Wolverhampton ironmaster, William Wood, for no other reason than that he had paid the King's mistress £10,000. And in 1753 they delighted Dublin by defeating an unpopular finance bill: "the ladies made balls, the mobs bonfires, the poets joyous odes."

By the 1760s, Patriot leaders of national stature had emerged, principally Henry Grattan, a young barrister and political journalist.

The outbreak of the American War of Independence in 1775 gave the Patriots a great opportunity. The parallel between the two countries was too close to be ignored. The British government could not afford another America just across the Irish Sea. The Protestant people were firmly united behind the Patriots, and now possessed a citizen army, the Volunteers, which had a potential muster of 50,000 armed men.

Rather than risk a confrontation, Britain made concessions: large concessions. On April 16, 1782, Grattan, confident of victory, moved a resolution for parliamentary independence in the Irish Commons. The galleries and bar were crowded with spectators and electric with expectation. Grattan, pale from recent illness, spoke. "I am now to address a free people; ages have passed away and this is the first moment in which you could be distinguished by such an appellation. . . . I found Ireland on her knees, I watched over her with a paternal solicitude; I have traced her progress from injuries to arms, and from arms to liberty.

. . . Ireland is now a nation; in that new character I hail her, and bowing to her august presence, I say, *Esto perpetua.* [May she live for ever.]"

The resolution was passed unanimously. Within the year, Britain conceded the sole right of the Irish parliament to legislate for Ireland. A blow had been struck, a link broken in the chains with which Britain bound her colony. To Irishmen of every political hue, of every religious sect, it was a stirring moment. Grattan's parliament lasted until the end of the century. But it lived long after in Irish memories as a symbol of freedom, prosperity and national dignity.

Many Protestant aristocrats now came to see themselves as the natural leaders of a united Ireland based on the land settlement of 1690. The Ascendancy, confident and secure, was a very considerable institution. It claimed some of the greatest literary names of the 18th Century – Burke, Swift, Sheridan, Goldsmith – and its capital, Dublin, was now taking on the distinctive appearance of one of the finest cities in Europe.

For a time, it seemed that Protestant rule might bring peace and unity. The penal code had been relaxed in practice if not in law as the bitter memories of 1690 grew dimmer; political allegiance was now determined more by Patriot than by religious issues. In fact, many Catholics readily became Protestants during the 18th Century, to benefit from the social, political and economic advantages of joining the Protestant Ascendancy. Had the Protestant Ascendancy remained united within itself and with the British government, on which its power ultimately depended, the Catholics might one day have become a minority in a Protestant nation of Ireland.

But it was all a mirage. A breath of the modern world, blowing in from Europe, would be enough to waft it away like a puff of smoke. And then the all-too familiar landscape of Irish politics would reappear underneath: sectarian divisions, poverty, agrarian violence.

Modern Europe was born in the French Revolution of 1789, and so was modern Ireland. In France, the Revolution established the supremacy of the middle classes in the towns, and, in the countryside, transferred the bulk of landed property to the peasants. It identified the whole people, not just the old regime of the landed classes, with the nation.

In Ireland, such momentous changes would destroy the Protestant Ascendancy and create a nationalist break-away movement from Britain. Within a decade, Ireland experienced her most vicious uprising yet, the Insurrection of 1798.

Almost immediately after the French Revolution, the Protestant Ascendancy split along class lines. The first Irish revolutionary cell was established by unenfranchized, middle-class Protestants in Ulster, by then the most advanced part of Ireland. They had been the backbone of the Volunteers, and it was their armed force that alarmed Britain into conceding autonomy to Grattan's parliament in 1782. If the aristocratic landowners inside that parliament would not now open the doors to them by parliamentary reform, they were prepared to force an entrance.

The first blow was struck by a 28-year-old Protestant barrister called Theobald Wolfe Tone. He was the leading light in the Society of United Irishmen, founded in Belfast in 1791. Through this society, which rapidly spawned new branches, Wolfe Tone began to work towards a grand, new vision of Ireland: an independent republic, united above religious divisions, inspired by the French Revolution and taking its national identity from the old Gaelic tradition.

Wolfe Tone placed great store by the political potential of the Catholics, both the middle classes smarting under the penal laws and the peasants smouldering with agrarian violence. Despite his commitment to a united Ireland, Tone was prepared, for the sake of expediency, to play off Catholic against Protestant.

In 1795, events played into his hands. Sectarian strife in the countryside, sharpened by rapid population growth, reached a crisis when two agrarian gangs, Peep o' Day Boys (Protestant) and Defenders (Catholic), fought a pitched battle in County Armagh. The Defenders were routed, and in the evening the victorious Protestants founded an Orange Society (later known as the Orange Order) to keep alive the glorious and immortal memory of their deliverer, William, Prince of Orange. During the next few months, Orangemen subjected Catholics in Ulster to a persecution so violent that thousands of them fled south as refugees. Orange societies sprang up all over rural Ireland, and a branch was even established in Dublin. Catholic peasants, convinced of an impending Protestant holocaust, flocked to join the Defenders and, by playing on their fears, Wolfe Tone managed to attach a large body of them to the United Irishmen.

The government of Dublin Castle was alarmed at Tone's success, for the old, old danger of foreign intervention in Ireland was once more a reality. Revolutionary France had declared war on Britain in 1793 and fully intended to support an Irish revolution. Already, a French agent suspected of collusion with the United Irishmen had been arrested in Dublin. The Castle therefore launched a counter-revolutionary campaign, and Wolfe Tone was forced to flee. By January, 1796, he was in Paris, actively preparing a French invasion to coincide with a rising by the United Irishmen. Indeed, in December an invasion fleet carrying 15,000 Frenchmen sailed for Ireland and part of it, accompanied by Wolfe Tone himself, actually entered Bantry Bay. But bad weather and bad leadership prevented a landing and after a few days the would-be invaders sailed away again.

Nevertheless, the United Irishmen were immensely encouraged and armed themselves with muskets and pikes for the overthrow of the state. Dublin Castle in turn stepped up its counter-revolutionary campaign dramatically. In March, 1797, the Lord Lieutenant, John Camden, sent a large force of irregular troops, recruited by the now thoroughly frightened landlords of Ireland, to subdue the hive of revolutionary activity, Belfast. The troops acted savagely, burning houses, flogging or torturing suspects and sending hundreds to the fleet as pressed men.

Encouraged by the success of this brutal policy, the Castle extended military coercion to the rest of the country. The Defenders were by now openly practising military manœuvres and were firmly behind the United Irishmen. Ireland, gripped by the two rival terrors of government coercion and revolutionary intimidation, drifted into anarchy

# THE GREAT FAMINE


**In the 1840s, Ireland was dangerously overpopulated. The peasants scraped a bare subsistence from their potato patches. Then the potato crop failed. One million Irishmen died. A million more, destitute, hounded by creditors and landlords (above), left their homeland, never to return.**

A young mother and son scratch over an already dug field, collecting the last few, blighted potatoes into an old hat. Another son crouches weakly by the youngest child, who has collapsed from malnutrition.

Undertakers unceremoniously cart away dead bodies, in a scene that captures the misery and degradation of a famine funeral in Skibbereen, County Cork.

## "Total Annihilation"

Between 1845 and 1849, there were two partial and three complete failures of the Irish potato crop. The result was "total annihilation," said *The Times*, shocked out of its usual reserve by this, the most horrific disaster in the British Isles since the Black Death of 1349.

Half-naked mothers, shivering in the snow and sleet, desperately combed the black, blighted fields for rotting potatoes while their children screamed with hunger. Ravenous peasants in their cabins ate diseased, slimy potatoes with the windows open to let out the stench. Bands of walking skeletons, lice-ridden, filthy, stinking, staggered into the towns, howling at doors for food. Their teeth fell out from scurvy; their bodies turned black and gangrenous from typhus; their bowels spattered the ground with blood clots from dysentery – the "bloody flux."

They died in the lanes, in doorways, in their homes, confronting horrified relief workers with visions of the Apocalypse: whole rooms of dead people; a dying man in bed with his dead wife with a cat gnawing at a dead infant near by; frozen corpses half devoured by rats.

A desperate crowd of peasants clamours at the gate of a workhouse in 1846. But even inside people starved, for workhouses were financed from the rates and, with Ireland destitute, they quickly ran out of funds.

Irish peasants raid a potato store during a pre-famine shortage of 1842. By then, the potato was the only nutritious food of most Irish peasants. If their crop failed, they starved.

# The Moment of Truth

Even while the country lay prostrate from the Great Famine, a new disaster struck. This time it was man-made. The Protestant landlords of Ireland, bankrupt because their destitute tenants could not pay the rent and anxious to turn their lands over to pasture, began a massive eviction campaign.

An eviction was an ugly scene. At a signal from the sheriff, the "drivers" – police or troops – dragged the miserable peasants from their cabin. Then the "crowbar brigade" tore down the thatched roof and "tumbled" the mud walls to prevent the homeless from returning for shelter. Screaming women, half-naked children, tottering grandparents were turned out into all weathers and left to crouch in shallow holes roofed with sticks and turf in the countryside.

But Britain had seen the evils of a system which gave all power to the landlords and none to the tenants. The reforms of the next half century extirpated landlordism from Ireland.

**The Anglo-Irish landlord began to appear in British eyes as a figure of oppression.**

As a bailiff pins up a notice of eviction (left), the threatened peasant thrusts an angry fist at a policeman. But the stronger arm of the law enforced what one peer insisted was "the landlord's most sacred right to deal with his property as he list."

A landlord and his henchmen watch imperturbably as a battering-ram thuds into the house of a tenant resisting eviction. The police stand by to prevent intervention by sympathizers.

Watched by an anguished crowd, a reluctant soldier brings out the last member of an evicted family and the sheriff on his horse prepares to order demolition by the crowbar brigade.

# II. Moderation or Violence?

In the violence of Ireland in 1798, the government had the upper hand, since the Castle's secret service worked with extraordinary efficiency. By May, all the leading conspirators in the United Irishmen had been arrested in Dublin, including a young Protestant aristocrat, Lord Edward Fitzgerald. The illustrious name of Fitzgerald, so intimately linked with the defence of Ireland's rights in the Middle Ages, could not but strike a chord in Irish hearts. In addition, Lord Edward was handsome, generous, romantically married to an illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Orleans and cast for a hero's part. He put up a heroic resistance to arrest, and was taken to Dublin Castle, mortally wounded. While he was held there, the new Lord Lieutenant, Lord Cornwallis, recently Viceroy of India, sent his private secretary to ask whether he had any confidential message to send to his wife. "Nothing, nothing," was the reply, "but oh! break it to her tenderly." Lord Edward later died in Newgate.

Ireland was now under martial law. The United Irishmen were daily losing ground. They had to act at once, or not at all. So it was that the Insurrection of 1798, the most celebrated of Irish rebellions, broke out on May 23 with almost no hope of success. There was no effective leadership. There was no idea of when French help would be expected. And there was no plan of action. In Ulster, the rebellion lasted a mere ten days and all three towns attacked by the United Irishmen – Antrim, Saintfield and Ballynahinch – held firm. Only in County Wexford was there any real threat to the government and there it took the form, not of republicanism, but of a religious war.

"The boys of Wexford," as the rebels were remembered in Irish legend, rose in rebellion under the leadership of a Roman Catholic priest, Father John Murphy. Goaded into fury by months of military coercion, they struck out with uncontrolled savagery, plundering Protestant property, attacking and slaughtering innocent citizens simply because they were Protestants. The irregular troops who were required to put down the rebellion struck back with equal savagery. They burned houses, executed the inhabitants on the merest suspicion of harbouring fugitives, laid waste wide areas of the country. No one's life or property was safe. All the deep, burning hatreds of divided Ireland came to the surface. It was an appalling calamity.

The end came quickly. When the rebels attacked the town of New Ross, they were repulsed by government troops with great slaughter. Only a month after the rising began, their stronghold at Vinegar Hill was captured, and by the end of June the rebellion was petering out.

Foreign help, so often Ireland's hope and so often her disappointment, arrived too late. Not until August did a French invasion force reach Connaught, and it consisted of only three ships with 1,100 men. Although it landed and fought courageously, it was defeated by irregular Irish troops in two weeks. A second French expedition accompanied by the tireless Wolfe Tone was intercepted by a naval squadron in September. Tone himself, wearing French uniform, was taken prisoner and sent to Dublin. To avoid the disgrace and horror of hanging, he committed suicide in prison by cutting his windpipe with a penknife.

It was all over. Wolfe Tone's vision of a republican Ireland united above religious animosities had proved ephemeral. The Insurrection of 1798 turned out to be, not a struggle of Irishmen against Britain, but of Irishmen against Irishmen. The old configuration of two nations, Protestant against Catholic, came once again to dominate Ireland.

One thing remained as a memorial to the United Irishmen: the tradition of revolutionary nationalism. In that, Tone's ideals were enshrined, and the Insurrection was remembered, and later idealized by Irish nationalists, not for what it was, but for what Tone hoped it would be.

The consequence of the Insurrection of 1798 was the end of Protestant autonomy in 1800. The gentlemen of Ireland had saved their constitution by their own efforts, it was true, for virtually no British troops had been employed in suppressing the Insurrection and the work had been done by irregular troops, mostly raised by the landlords. But in British eyes, the Protestant Ascendancy had failed. The Ulster Protestants had shown themselves to be unreliable. The suppressed fury of the Catholics remained a serious danger. With the war against France still threatening Ireland, William Pitt, the British Prime Minister, decided to take away the Protestants' proud constitution and replace it with a stronger safeguard for Britain.

Pitt's solution was to amalgamate the two countries into one and neutralize Catholic discontent by returning to them the right, lost in the 17th Century, of sitting in Parliament – Catholic Emancipation, as it was now known. On August 1, 1800, the first part of the plan was completed. Grattan's parliament, the pride of Ireland, was persuaded to accomplish the extraordinary feat of voting for its own extinction, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland came into existence. Over £1,240,000 was paid in bribes and compensation to key members of the landed classes, who had the most to lose, and a large British army was quartered in Ireland; but the fundamental reason for this oddest of events was that the gentlemen of Ireland believed the Protestant Ascendancy was doomed without British support. If the price of that support was the abolition of their own parliament, they must pay it. From now on, Ireland was represented, not in the Dublin parliament, but by 100 Irish M.P.s sitting in the House of Commons and 32 Irish peers in the House of Lords at Westminster. The Parliament House in College Green was sold to the Bank of Ireland. One by one the mansions of the Anglo-Irish nobility were turned into offices. The united Protestant nation was dead.

The second part of Pitt's plan, Catholic Emancipation, proved more difficult than the first. Anti-Catholic prejudice was still strong in Britain, and the cabinet split on the question. Pitt resigned in March, 1801. The new ministry under Addington shelved the issue. Britain was left still ruling Ireland through only one section of society, the weakened, frightened, but nevertheless tough-knuckled Protestant Ascendancy.

Pitt's failure to carry Catholic Emancipation was an unmitigated disaster for the future stability of Ireland. By giving the Catholics a burning grievance, it reinforced the religious division of the country and kept alive a will to resist that later threatened the peace of Britain herself. For the first 20 years after the

**Charles Stewart Parnell, leader of Irish nationalism in the 1880s, lived and worked as a moderate – seeking tenant rights and Home Rule by constitutional means – yet he died a revolutionary hero.**

creation of the United Kingdom, Irish politics almost ceased to exist. For almost half a century, there was only one Irish politician of stature, Daniel O'Connell. And it was Catholic Emancipation that he made his platform.

O'Connell, as it happened, was a leader of immense energy and resourcefulness. Exuberant and aggressive by nature, he soon became known for his extraordinary command over large crowds, and created the first mass political movement in Ireland, designed to wrest Catholic objectives from Britain by constitutional means. In May, 1824, he introduced a highly original scheme for the payment of membership subscriptions to his organization, the Catholic Association. All who could not afford the annual fee of one guinea were now offered associate membership by subscribing a penny a month. The parochial clergy were co-opted to make the collections every Sunday. The effect was startling. In the first week £8 were collected; within a year, this had risen to £1,000 a week. Suddenly, through this "Catholic rent," as it was known, O'Connell had become leader of "the whole mass of the popish population," as a Protestant observer noticed with alarm.

In 1826 O'Connell displayed his power in the countryside by getting himself elected to the House of Commons in a by-election. He then refused to take the Oath of Supremacy – which by acknowledging the King of England as the supreme head of the Church, would technically have converted him to Anglicanism – and was consequently refused entry to Parliament. All over Ireland, Catholics staged semi-military demonstrations of protest and the British government, fearing civil war, felt it best to yield. In April 1829, Catholic Emancipation became a reality. It was a great turning-point.

O'Connell's campaign for emancipation had been a symbolic crusade against the whole injustice of the Protestant Ascendancy. And because, by the political accident of 1801, Britain had allied herself with the Protestants, it was implicitly a crusade against the Union. The Catholic cause and the cause of national independence had become intimately linked. The stage had been set for the next century of Irish history.

Having built up so powerful a political movement, O'Connell needed a new battle-cry, and the natural one to choose was repeal of the Act of Union. But whereas his first campaign ended in success, his second ended in fiasco. The mass meetings through which he conducted his repeal agitation so alarmed the government that in 1843 the largest of them, due to be held at Clontarf on the outskirts of Dublin, was declared illegal. O'Connell's words had always been more violent than his intentions, and he maintained a solid respect for the rule of law. He surrendered, and cancelled the meeting at once – and thereby cancelled his own influence with the crowds that were even then converging on Dublin. The way was left open for new leadership, this time of a more extreme kind.

It was already in existence, a group within O'Connell's Repeal Association known as Young Ireland. Its members took their cue from Wolfe Tone and, like the United Irishmen of 1798, they had a vision of an Irish nation united above religious differences. Unlike O'Connell, whose movement was strictly constitutional, they were prepared to use force. "Who fears to speak of 98?" began the most famous ballad published in their newspaper, the *Nation*. In Europe's revolutionary year, 1848, Young Ireland staged a minor rebellion in Munster. It was easily suppressed, but the revolutionary tradition, laid down by Wolfe Tone in 1798, had been picked up and preserved. It was to inspire Irish nationalism from the mid-19th Century on.

A revolutionary programme could not have succeeded without deep-seated economic and social grievances, and the mass of the Irish people had them. Four-fifths of the population were dependent on the land, the land seized by conquest and colonization, the land still held by the Protestant Ascendancy. And in the mid-19th Century, they were even more impoverished than they had been a century before. The population had continued to grow, from about five million in 1800 to well over eight million in the 1840s. Holdings had been subdivided and further subdivided, and half of all tenant farmers had been reduced to cultivating the potato as their only crop. When the potato harvest failed – as it often did on a local level – they starved.

But in 1845 blight ruined the potato crop over the whole country, and the tragedy was repeated in successive years from 1845 to 1849. This was the Great Famine. It was the greatest tragedy experienced by the Irish people.

Potato blight, *Phytophthora infestans*, which reduces potatoes to stinking slime, was first reported in August, 1845, in the south of England. When it spread to Ireland, the extent of the impending disaster was not immediately apparent. The first season of the Great Famine was not, in fact, disastrous. Many peasants still had something left they could pawn for food, and they had the hope of a plentiful harvest the following year.

But in August, 1846, the blight struck again. "I beheld with sorrow one wide waste of putrefying vegetation," wrote a Roman Catholic priest. "In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands, and bewailing bitterly the destruction that had left them foodless." Millions of people faced the prospect of starvation in 1846, and again in 1847, 1848 and 1849.

Various government relief measures were suggested and tried: £100,000 of Indian corn to be sold cheaply so as to keep down the price of food; public works to provide employment; relief committees set up to raise funds and distribute food donated by the landlords.

Such methods might have worked in England; but in Ireland they were doomed to failure. There the peasant rarely handled money, and virtually never used it to buy food: he paid his rent by his labour, and fed himself and his family on his own potatoes. The Irish had not eaten corn for years, and even if they had been able to buy the corn, there were few facilities for milling it. No one had the slightest idea of how to prepare, cook and eat bullet-hard Indian corn. The Irish peasant had no way of turning wages into food. There was no system of retail distribution, no village shops where food could be bought.

Moreover, the landlords were no help. As a class, they lived beyond their incomes and their estates were heavily mortgaged. When their income dried up, they were faced with bankruptcy, and they began to evict their tenants. There was only one thing to be done: make the imperial exchequer pay for famine relief.

But that was impossible, for two reasons. The prevailing *laissez-faire* doctrine of political economy, based on the belief that an economy ran best without interference from government, inhibited direct aid. The other reason for the failure to provide aid was the British attitude to Ireland, and it is this that has impressed itself most deeply on the Irish memory. Britain was only interested in Ireland when she became a threat to British security. The Great Famine was not such a threat. The average British politician persisted in jealously opposing any proposal for wasting British taxpayer's money on an Irish population which not only seemed alien and far away, but also seditious. Englishmen became impatient of Ireland. The "selfish, perverse and turbulent character of the people" was to blame, declared the historian Charles Trevelyan, and many would have heartily agreed with him.

Weakened by famine, the Irish people were struck by disease. Typhus and relapsing fever, dysentery, scurvy and famine dropsy ravaged the whole country, carrying off not only the peasants but also the middle and upper classes in the towns. From 1846 onwards, there was a hysterical rush to escape the "doomed and starving island," and thousands of panic-stricken refugees put to sea for the United States and British North America. Starving, verminous and disease-ridden, they crowded in their panic into any hulk that was to be found, "coffin ships" as they became known because of the frightful mortality rates on them. Of the emigrants sailing from Cork, one in nine died on the voyage, more than on many slave-ships of the 18th Century.

By 1851, emigration had risen to a quarter of a million a year and remained very high for the rest of the century. It was a massive exodus. Everywhere the emigrants went, they took with them a hatred of Britain and all things British. A great new Irish community in America grew up, prepared to support any movement for Irish independence with funds and political agitation.

The results of the Great Famine in Ireland were epoch-making. Before it, much of Ireland was Irish-speaking; after it English became the normal language. The bulk of the old Gaelic people, who were the poorest and therefore the first to be hit by the famine, had died or emigrated. By 1851, the population might have been expected to reach 8,500,000. In fact, it fell to 6,553,000. The decline continued right up to the end of the century, when the Irish population was half what it had been only a decade before.

This terrible catastrophe left a legacy of bitter hatred against Britain. Though voluntary organizations had done much to mitigate the suffering, by setting up soup-kitchens and reporting back on the true, disastrous dimensions of the famine, Irishmen could not but feel that British government policy displayed a callous disregard for Ireland. The charge against Britain, that if the cry of want had been raised at home, the people would have been fed, was a real one.

And that was the crux of the Irish condition. Despite the Act of Union, Ireland was still being treated as an alien dependency by Britain. Despite the parliamentary union, Dublin Castle was still the centre of administration, still the court of a Lord Lieutenant – a sign of continuing colonial status. Moreover, that separate administration was still the symbol and instrument of the Protestant Ascendancy. After the Great Famine, British politicians began to wonder about the value of a union that condemned Ireland to such unnatural suffering. The whole question of the land of Ireland became a hot political issue. At last, the inherent injustice of the Protestant Ascendancy came to be questioned.

In Ireland, the dispute was argued for the next 20 years in the countryside, by the usual methods of agrarian outrage. Only now there was a new determination and direction. Daniel O'Connell had died in 1847. His place was taken by a new and more extreme political figure, James Stephens, who had taken part in the abortive 1848 rebellion, cunningly staged his own funeral at Kilkenny and escaped to Paris. In 1858 he returned to Ireland and, with a fellow conspirator of 1848, John O'Mahony, set up an oath-bound secret society dedicated to the forceful overthrow of British power in Ireland. Significantly it had two branches: in Ireland it was christened the Irish Re-

**In a lurid British cartoon on Parnell's secret weapon, agrarian outrage, "Moonlighters" punish a landlord by shearing off his daughters' hair and pouring pitch on their heads.**

publican Brotherhood, known to its members as "the Organization," and in America as the Fenian Brotherhood. Both branches were usually called Fenians.

After two totally ineffective insurrections in 1865 and 1867, the Fenians made a highly significant sortie into Britain. In September, 1867, they successfully rescued two Fenian prisoners from Manchester, killing an English policeman in the process; and in December, 1868, during a similar rescue attempt at Clerkenwell, they exploded a bomb which killed 20 people. There was a wave of public horror and fury in Britain, but it was followed by the realization that there must be something fundamentally unhealthy about Irish politics

With the new awareness of Irish troubles went a willingness to consider the bold remedies which were necessary. The way was open for the first serious attempt by a British government to improve the condition of Ireland. At long last, the figure of Justice presiding over the gateway to Dublin Castle was to become the symbol, not just of Britain's own national aspirations, but of her goodwill towards Ireland. The man who took the initiative was William Ewart Gladstone, who became Prime Minister for the first time in 1868. The Irish Question had been one of his deepest concerns for over 20 years, and his first comment on receiving his summons from the Queen was: "My mission is to pacify Ireland." His solution was to disestablish the Irish Church and reform the land system.

In 1861, out of an Irish population of 5,750,000, there were 4,500,000 Roman Catholics and a mere 700,000 members of the Church of Ireland, the Anglicans of Ireland. Yet the whole population paid tithes to the Established Church. It was a glaring unjustice and in 1869 Gladstone brought it to an end with his Church Disestablishment Act. The legal connection between Church and State was severed, the Church of Ireland became a voluntary body and its property was confiscated. The Act made little practical difference to the Irish people, who continued to pay tithes to the state, but as a symbolic gesture, it was highly important. With very little fuss, a totem of the old Protestant Ascendancy had been torn down.

The following year, Gladstone steered through Parliament the most radical Land Act that he could expect an assembly still largely consisting of landowners to pass. It gave the tenant farmers the right to compensation for unfair eviction, and offered government loans to those who wished to buy their holdings from the landlords. But it did not give security of tenure, it did not protect the tenant from rent increases and the purchase loans system did not work. One contemporary Irish observer later described Gladstone's measures as "facile panaceas" and dismissed him as a man in cloud-cuckoo land with the withering indictment that he "apprehended things romantically, therefore in a manner suited for passionate treatment in large halls." Irishmen were still not convinced that their interests could be safely entrusted to British parliamentarians, however well-meaning.

**A boycotted labourer is forced to bury his own child. British cartoon attacks like this on Parnell's extremism increased both his prestige in Ireland and his confidence at Westminster.**

There was only one solution to the economic ills of Ireland: to abolish the Protestant Ascendancy and the land settlement on which it rested. But would that be enough? The political animosities built up by long Protestant domination had also to be abolished. How much would Britain have to concede before those animosities were dissolved? Would self-government along the lines of Grattan's parliament be sufficient? Or would it be complete independence, the revolutionary vision of Wolfe Tone? The answer would depend on the speed with which Britain moved toward reform.

After Gladstone's failure to go fast enough in 1869 and 1870, two great traditions, one constitutional, the other revolutionary, ran side by side so closely that in the end the decision about which would triumph was taken within a single political movement with two wings.

The moderate wing began as the Home Government Association, a small, unrepresentative body founded in 1870 to press for a measure of self-government. Its founder was Isaac Butt, son of a Church of Ireland parson, a successful barrister and, in politics, a conservative. Butt believed a Fenian revolution would be a disaster, and that the best guarantee against it would be the government of Ireland by her natural rulers: the nobility, gentry and wealthy middle classes.

To win popular support, however, Butt had to widen his programme to include land reform and denominational education (for Catholics). In 1873 the movement's name was changed to the Home Rule League and, on the new, popular programme, won a great election victory in 1874 when 59 of its members were elected as M.P.s to Westminster. Immediately after hearing the news, the new M.P.s met in Dublin and constituted themselves as "a separate and distinct party in the House of Commons," complete with party whips. This Home Rule party represented Ireland in the imperial Parliament for the next 40 years.

The extremist wing of the Home Rule movement began as the Land League, founded in 1878–79 by two Fenians, Michael Davitt and John Devoy. Like the Fenians, it had both an Irish and an American branch and was financed by American money – "the pennies of the Irish servant-girls" as its enemies called

it. The Land League combined mass meetings with a subtle and highly effective policy of organized ostracism. By selecting estates with bad records for rack-renting and eviction, it then proceeded to make everyday life impossible for the landlord – or, if he was an absentee, his agent – by withdrawal of services and other devices. It was one such campaign against a certain Captain Charles Boycott, agent for an estate in Mayo, that gave the word "boycotting" to English and many other languages. "Grabbers," who rented land cleared by evictions, were given the same treatment.

The two wings of the Home Rule movement, the Land League and the Home Rule League, with its parliamentary party, were first united in 1879–80, in the remarkable person of an Anglo-Irish gentleman, Charles Stewart Parnell. In 1879, at Davitt's invitation, he became President of the Land League and in the following year, after Isaac Butt's death, he was elected chairman of the Home Rule party. Almost at once he was popularly recognized as the leader of the people, at home and abroad. It was a remarkable achievement for a man of 34, a Protestant and a landlord.

For such a man to lead the Catholic peasantry of Ireland, which is what it amounted to, was remarkable. Strange to say, it was his family background that engendered in him, not the entrenched attitudes of the Protestant Ascendancy, but the radicalism of a patriot. His great-grandfather and his grandfather had both opposed parliamentary union with Britain, in the tradition of Grattan and the Patriots, and his mother was an American with a strong antipathy towards Britain and everything British (her father had fought on the American side in the war of 1812). Parnell grew up with that ambiguous, disturbing mixture of jealousy and contempt with which many colonists regarded their mother country.

Ambiguity marked everything Parnell did. In order to win a popular following, he had to strike the extreme attitudes of revolutionary Irish nationalism: that was his Land League personality. But he had no intention of leading an armed rebellion, and worked only for the greatest degree of independence practicably obtainable by normal, peaceful constitutional methods: that was his Home Rule personality.

For ten years Parnell performed a delicate balancing act with masterly success. By ably manipulating agrarian agitation through the Land League, he forced on the British Parliament the emergency Land Act of 1881. Like the Land Act of 1870, it was carried by Gladstone, but this time it had teeth. It conceded the "three Fs" which would at last make tenant farming viable: fair rent, fixity of tenure and freedom to sell the right of occupancy. This Act was nearly the end of the Protestant Ascendancy: it fatally cracked the land settlements of 1652 and 1690 and reduced the landlords to mere receivers of rent.

Parnell, caught between the extremists of the Land League, who wished to wage war on the landlords, and the danger of losing the tenants' support for Home Rule, temporized, neither condemning nor applauding the Act. The strong-line Lord Lieutenant, William Forster, believed he was deliberately trying to wreck the Act, and on October, 1, 1881 imprisoned him in Kilmainham gaol and proscribed the Land League.

This solved Parnell's dilemma. His prestige among the peasantry soared. A spate of agrarian violence convulsed Ireland. But before the extremists could get full control, Parnell and Gladstone came to an informal arrangement, known as the "Kilmainham treaty," by which Parnell was released to continue his moderate policies and thus calm the country.

On May 6, 1882, one of the most famous of crimes played into his hands. Lord Frederick Cavendish, Forster's successor as Lord Lieutenant, and T.H.Burke, the Under-Secretary, were knifed to death by a band of assassins known as "The Invincibles" in Phoenix Park, Dublin, close to the viceregal lodge. Parnell was horrified and very nearly resigned from political life. But his obvious sincerity made a good impression in Britain and, in the aftermath of the murder, he was able to found a new, more moderate body that replaced the Land League. It was known as the National League and acted as a constituency organization for the Home Rule party at Westminster, winning Parnell a great election victory in 1885.

Gladstone, determined to create a true reconciliation between Britain and Ireland, had in the meantime been converted to Home Rule. Had he succeeded in carrying a Home Rule Bill through Parliament at that time, Ireland might well have been satisfied with self-government within the British Empire. Gladstone's first attempt in 1886 split his party and brought the Tories back to office. But he was prepared to try again and by 1890, a Liberal return to power and a second Home Rule Bill seemed possible.

Then, unaccountably, perversely, the whole course of Irish history was altered by what was in itself a quite insignificant event. In November, 1890, Parnell was cited as co-respondent in a divorce action by Captain W.H.O'Shea. Parnell had indeed been living with Captain O'Shea's wife, Katherine, and actually had two children by her. He offered no defence, and the verdict was given against him. Utter confusion followed. Gladstone, though not censorious himself, felt it impossible to continue his alliance with the Home Rule Party with Parnell as head of it. Parnell's followers had already enthusiastically affirmed their confidence in him, but there was now a political question: whether to lose Gladstone and keep Parnell, or vice versa. The result was a split: 43 walked out, and only 27 remained under Parnell's leadership.

Parnell reacted wildly. In a "manifesto to the Irish people," he turned his back completely on his previous moderate policy, denounced Gladstone's Home Rule proposals as hopelessly inadequate and repudiated the idea of alliance with any British political party. The strain broke his health. Within a year he was dead. He was just over 45 years old.

The man who had spent his whole political career working for a moderate, constitutional solution to Ireland's troubles went down in Irish memories as the "lost leader" of 1891 who tried in vain to rescue his country from entanglement in British party politics. He became the hero of the Fenians, not the parliamentarians, and joined the pantheon of Ireland's revolutionary liberators.

The final nemesis of seven centuries of British colonial rule came in the next 25 years. Every generation must bear the cross of its parents' failures and in Ire-

land, where failures extended back many generations, it was a heavy cross indeed. The consequence of partial conquest and partial colonization, those twin pillars of British rule that had been repaired so often over the centuries but never made good, was the division of Ireland into two armed camps, one, largely Catholic, harbouring the most extreme nationalists and the other, largely Protestant, containing the most extreme unionists.

Parnell had been fighting for two objectives: the demolition of the Protestant Ascendancy, which meant giving the land of Ireland to the peasant farmers; and Home Rule, which meant reopening the parliament in College Green. On the first count, he had partially succeeded; on the second, he had completely failed. After Parnell's death, Gladstone returned briefly to power, an old man now of 83, and introduced his long-planned second Home Rule Bill in 1893. But it was rejected by the House of Lords and he resigned for the last time. From 1895 until 1906 – 11 years – the fortunes of Ireland were entrusted to the Tories.

Home Rule now became impossible. The Tory Party represented the most conservative, staunchly Protestant and imperialistic sections of British society, and now included the Liberal Unionists under Chamberlain who had broken away from Gladstone in 1886. In changing its name to the Conservative and Unionist Party, it declared its intention implacably to oppose any threat to the Union of 1800 or to the integrity of the Empire.

The man now faced with the task of ruling strife-torn Ireland was Arthur Balfour, Chief Secretary in Dublin Castle. He adopted a well-worn policy: coercion and conciliation. To suppress agrarian violence, he would use coercion; to win over the mass of the Irish people, conciliation. He was prepared to go very far in conciliation: he would "kill Home Rule by kindness." He would, in fact, dismantle what remained of the Protestant Ascendancy. His plan was to encourage farmers to buy out their landlords with the aid of government loans. The landlords, having by now lost real control over their estates, were ready to sell. The tenants were ready to buy. It was simply a matter of agreeing a price. The haggling dragged on until 1902 when Lord Dunraven, a leading landlord from County Limerick, chaired a conference in which both interests were represented. Neither side could "take responsibility for breaking off negotiations," reported a caustic observer, so "with good will in all quarters, and a bonus of £12 million from the British taxpayer," the Irish Land Act of 1903 (it was drawn up by a descendant of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, George Wyndham) came into being. Its success was dramatic. In 1903 there were over 500,000 tenant farmers in Ireland; by 1909, 270,000 had bought and 46,000 more were negotiating to buy their estates; ten years later, Irish peasant farmers at last owned the soil they tilled. Britain had bought out the very landlords she had sent over two centuries before as settlers.

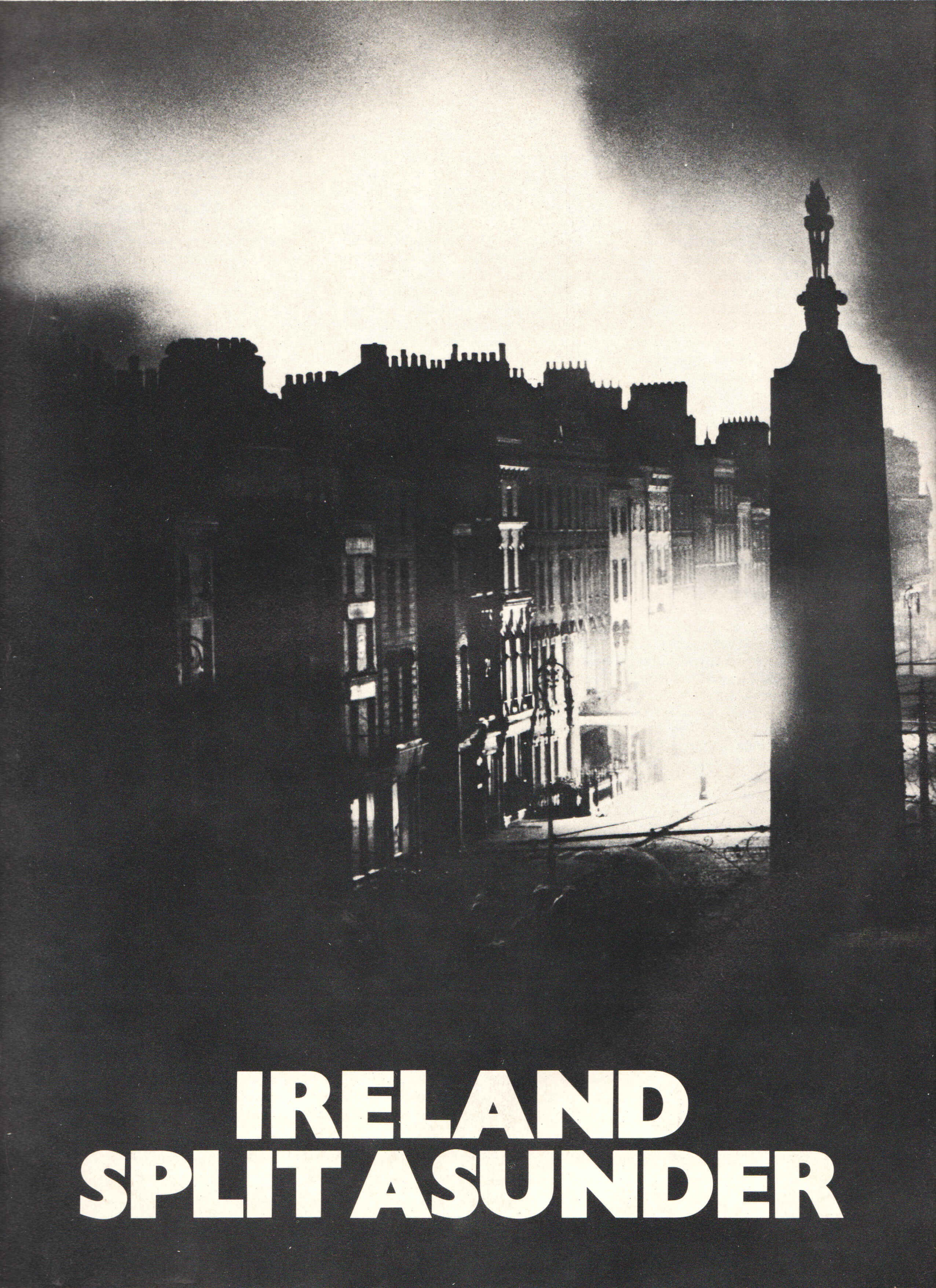
Balfour's conciliation was very far-reaching, but it was too late and not enough to alter the trend of Irish history. He was remembered, not as "kind Balfour," but "bloody Balfour," the coercionist. A moderate policy offering Ireland Home Rule might have succeeded, but one which aimed to keep the Irish M.P.s at Westminster could never have succeeded, however much "kindness" accompanied it. The legacy of bitterness built up by the Protestant Ascendancy since the 17th Century was too strong.

There was another legacy of the 17th Century that Balfour could not alter: the Protestant colony of Ulster. There the settlers had established, not just a landed oligarchy but a homogeneous community. In Ulster the idea of implanting a new nation had worked. It is possible to buy out landlords, but very difficult to buy out a whole nation.

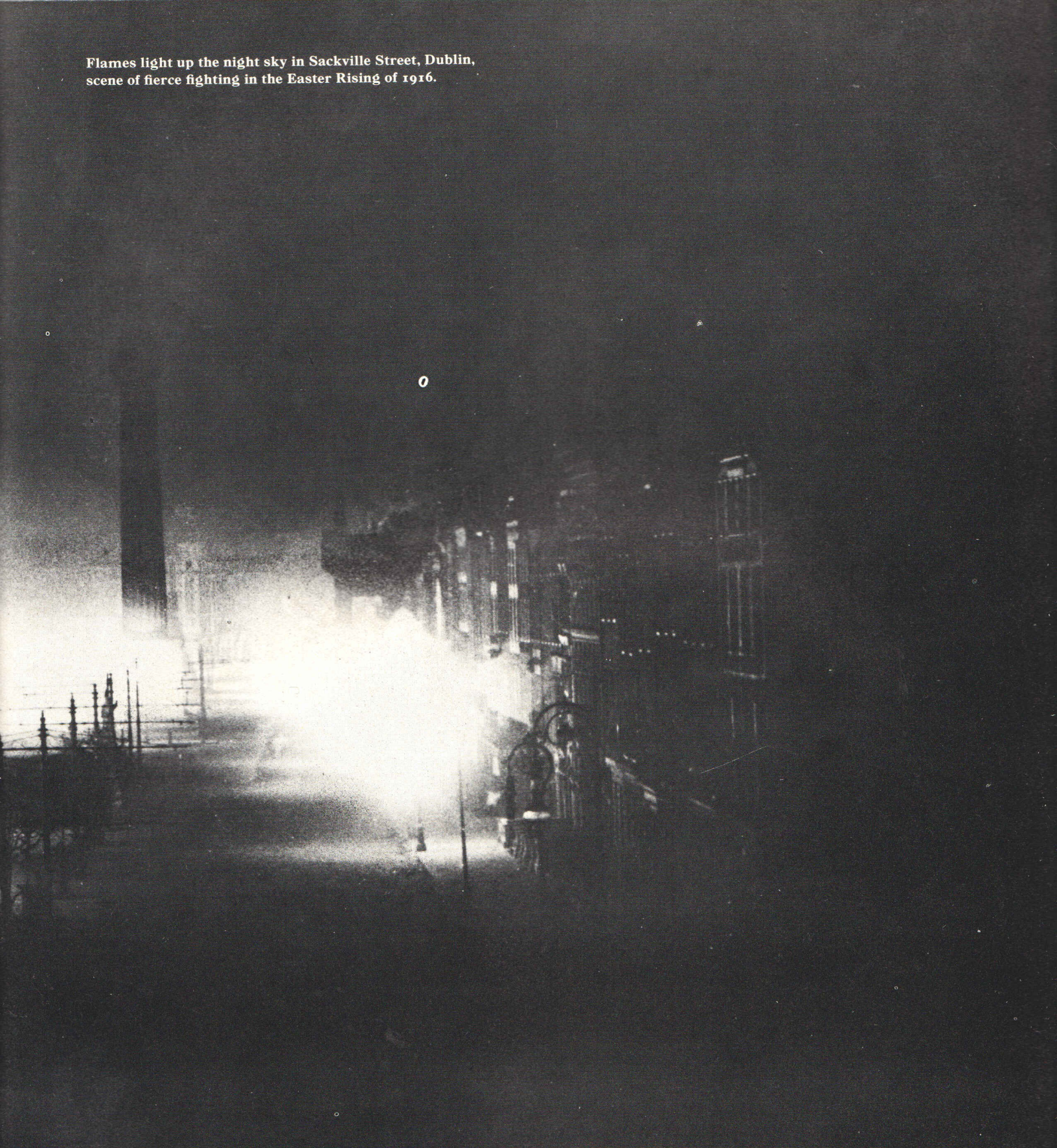
Ulstermen had undergone a sea change since the revolutionary nationalism of their United Irishmen in the 1790s. The change had already begun in 1798. It was partly the stirring of the Evangelical revival, partly a loss of faith in revolutionary France, partly the tough coercion of Dublin Castle. But above all, it was the news that the Insurrection of 1798 in Wexford had become a crusade against Protestants. The old sectarian fears, once enshrined in the Orange Order, spread throughout Protestant Ulster. The bald fact that the Catholic population of Ireland was overwhelming always inclined Protestants against a total break with Britain. And during the 19th Century Ulster had built up an industrial prosperity that was a strong contrast to the poverty of southern Ireland. To Ulstermen, the Union came to seem a guarantee of prosperity and security. And Home Rule, because Catholics were for it, must mean "Rome Rule." The Ulster attitude to that was simply summed up in the slogan "We will not have Home Rule."

The Home Rulers of the old, moderate Parnellite strain were in a difficult situation, though they did not see it at once. Ulster was becoming stubborn. Equally troubling, the death of Parnell and the failure of Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill had deflated popular enthusiasm for constitutional methods and encouraged revolutionary nationalism. This was more romantic, more Catholic and more Gaelic than the nationalism of the United Irishmen. It looked back to Wexford rather than Belfast. And although its disciples were an amalgam of native Gaelic and Anglo-Irish, they saw themselves as the direct heirs of the ancient Gaelic tradition, smothered but not extinguished by conquest and colonization.

It was an extremist outlook, born of long hatred and misery. The Protestant Ascendancy, though destroyed, lived on in its enemies' hearts. The Gaelic League, a cultural society founded in 1893, made de-Anglicization an Irish crusade. Everything English was to be cast aside, including "such foreign and fantastic field sports as lawn tennis, polo, croquet, cricket and the like." This society represented the most extreme Gaelic outlook in Ireland, but at the Abbey Theatre, opened in 1904, writers of first-rank international stature, including Yeats, Synge and Joyce, greatly strengthened the new cultural nationalism by creating a powerful form of drama which, although written in English, was evocatively Irish in spirit. In 1899, these sentiments received a more political expression when Arthur Griffith, a Dublin journalist, founded his newspaper the *United Irishman* and expounded the gospel of *Sinn Fein*, "Ourselves Alone," a doctrine of self-help and passive resistance to British rule that sprang from the failure of the Irish M.P.s at Westminster to win Home Rule. By 1905 Arthur Griffith's movement had been organized as a political party



# IRELAND SPLIT ASUNDER



Flames light up the night sky in Sackville Street, Dublin, scene of fierce fighting in the Easter Rising of 1916.

Hardly had the 20th Century begun than the Irish took their grievances out of Parliament once again and argued them in the streets more angrily than ever.

The true extent of Ireland's divisions was revealed. There were now two Irish nations, the dour, reactionary colonists of Ulster and the romantic, revolutionary republicans of Dublin, each pursuing opposite objectives. Dublin wanted Home Rule, but Ulster would not have it. And if Ulster blocked Home Rule, as she did in 1912, Dublin would settle for nothing less than total independence, as the Easter Rising of 1916 demonstrated. Ireland was split asunder and the U.K. was threatened with civil war.

A staunch, middle-class Ulsterwoman canvasses a working-class housewife to sign the Covenant against Home Rule in 1912. Solidarity between the classes gave Ulster unionism much of its strength.


Londonderry cheers the arrival of Edward Carson, Ulster Unionist leader (centre), and F.E. Smith (right), then Carson's A.D.C. and later, as Lord Birkenhead, Lord Chancellor.

New recruits to the Ulster Volunteers – a solicitor, a worker and a shopkeeper – practise semaphore signalling after work.

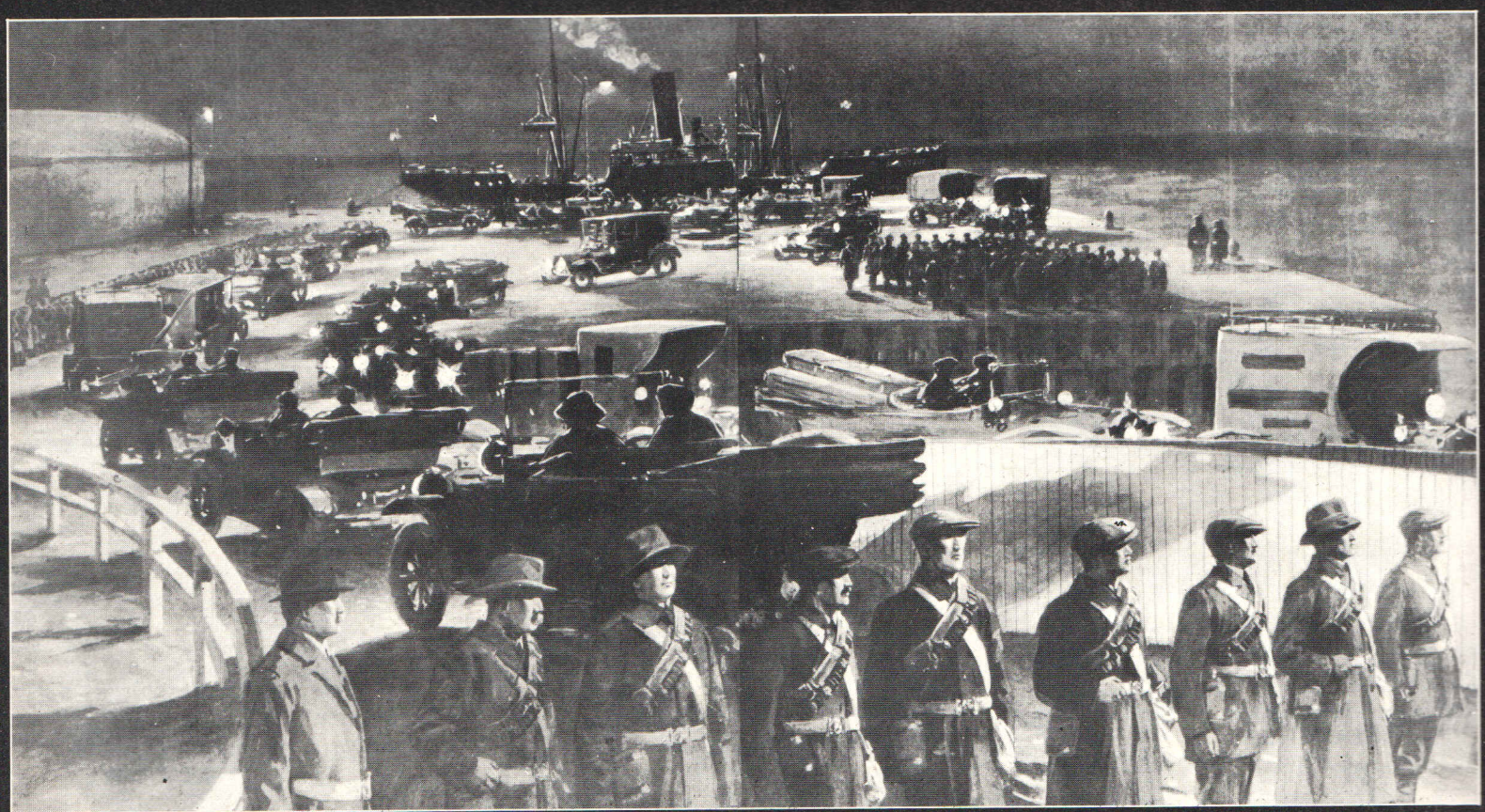
# Ulster's Covenant

While the third Home Rule Bill was progressing through Parliament in 1912, the Protestant colonists of Ulster were marching through the streets. On September 28, 200,000 filed into Belfast City Hall and ceremonially signed a "Solemn League and Covenant" to use "all means" – a sinister phrase – to defeat the Bill and keep Ulster in the United Kingdom.

This was a religious occasion in more ways than one. The sacred document was blessed by Protestant clergy and ministers, and it was deliberately named after that other Covenant, signed by Scottish Presbyterians in 1637, and intended to stamp out Roman practices in the Church. The second Covenant was, in fact, a declaration of faith in 17th-Century principles: Ulster had not forgotten the popish conspiracies of 1641 and 1689, nor the "glorious memory" of William, Prince of Orange, who in 1690 delivered them "out of the hands of our enemies." Ulster was ready to fight again.

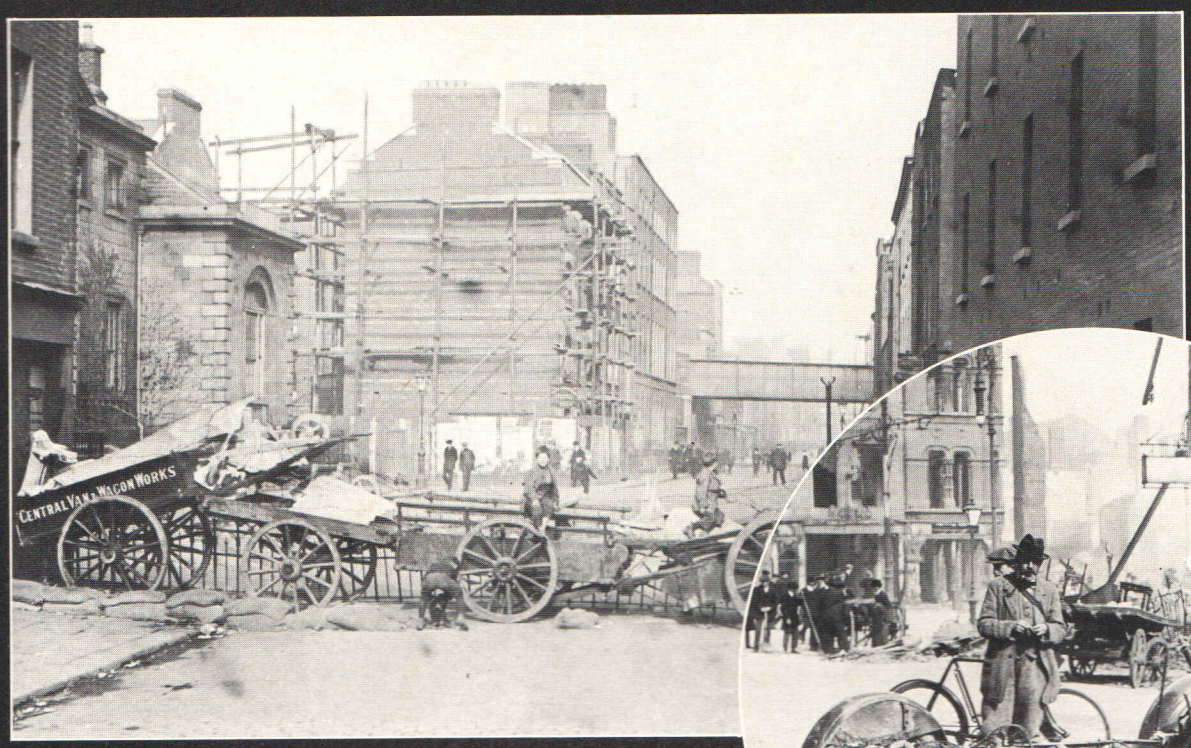
It was a formidable challenge to the peace of Britain. Ulstermen of all classes were united behind the Orange banner. They had the sympathy of the British Army and the Tories, and the open support of prominent men in British public life. By March, 1914, they had an army of 100,000 men. By April, with a friendly wink from the authorities, they had landed 35,000 rifles and five million rounds of ammunition at Larne. Only the outbreak of the First World War averted civil war.


**Orangemen march through Coleraine, one of the towns colonized by the City of London in 1610.**

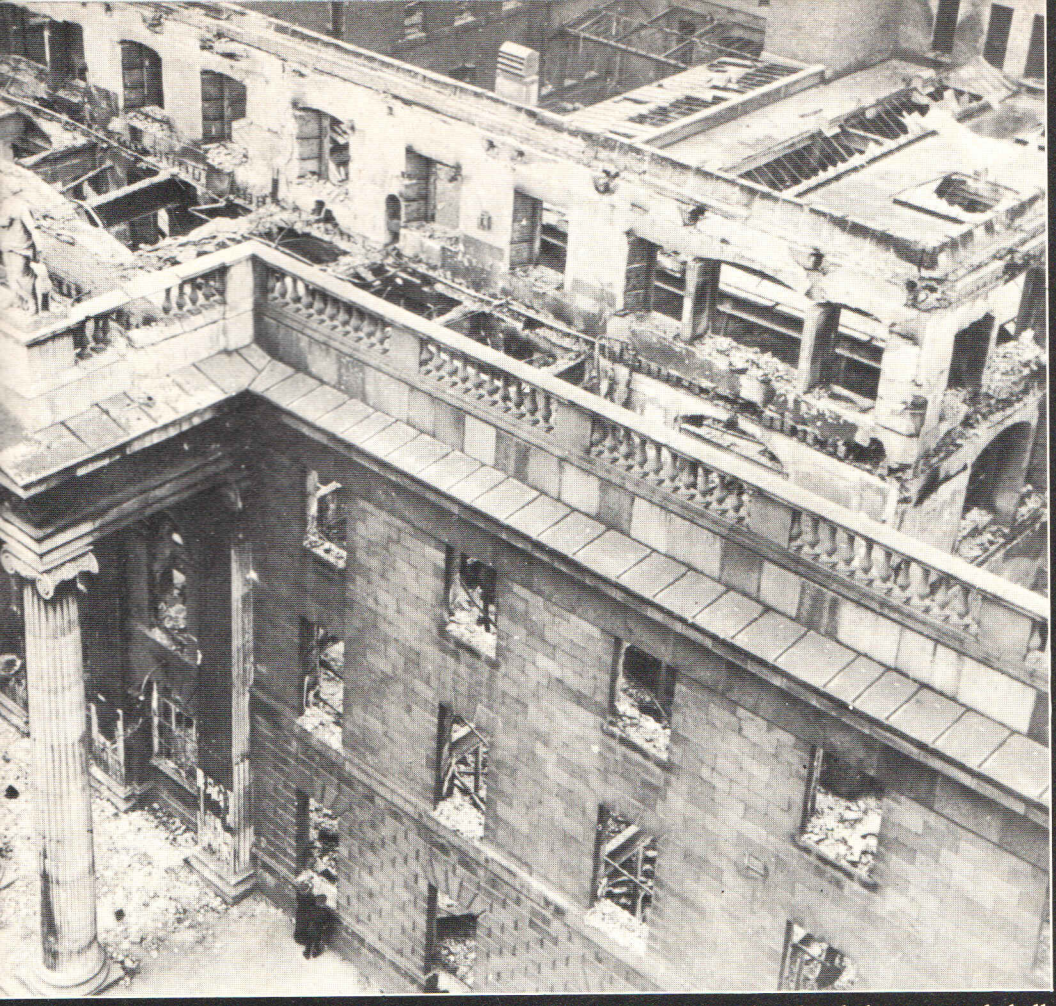


**Larne harbour throbs with the noise of car engines and platoons drilling as Ulster Volunteers unload rifles from the *Mountjoy* in April, 1914.**

Children play on a Dublin barricade after the Easter Rising, while knots of dazed citizens assess the damage and adjust to the idea that the "Sinn Feiners" had to be taken seriously.




One of the hundreds of sightseers who flocked into the streets gazes at the wreckage of a car used in a barricade.



The Post Office, which had been the rebel headquarters, was bombarded to a gutted shell.

# Dublin's Blood Sacrifice

On Easter Monday, April 25, 1916, several motley contingents of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army marched through bank-holiday crowds in Dublin and seized 14 major buildings without firing a shot. The Easter Rising had begun. It was the most determined attempt to set up an independent Irish republic since the Insurrection of 1798.

As a military operation it was a farce. The leadership was bungled. Only one-fifth of rebel troops reported for duty. One platoon which commandeered a tram even paid its fares: 57 tuppennies. Most Dubliners remained apathetic and rebellion did not spread outside the capital. Once the British brought in troops and deployed their artillery, the rising collapsed after only five days.

But as a symbolic act, it was highly significant. After the rising, 15 rebel leaders were executed and, by their blood sacrifice, they left their political heirs a debt of honour: to fight on with courage until Ireland at last was free.

British troops fire from the barricades at a rebel stronghold. The tactics of surrounding a rebel area and reducing it by artillery and infantry fire worked with methodical efficiency.

# III. Two Nations in One Island

Just how irrevocably divided Ireland had become was demonstrated soon after the return of a Liberal government in 1906. With their majority reduced in the election of 1910, the Liberals found themselves dependent on the votes of the Irish M.P.s under Parnell's successor, John Redmond. Redmond's price was a third Home Rule Bill. In January, 1913, it was passed by the Commons but rejected by the Lords. Nevertheless, under the terms of the 1911 Parliament Act, the Lords' veto lasted only two years and the Bill would automatically become law at the end of 1914. It seemed like a victory for Redmond, who received congratulations from the Dominions of Canada, South Africa and Australia. Even though the Bill conceded less than Dominion status, the vast majority of Irishmen were in favour of it.

In fact it was the end of the road for constitutional methods. Presbyterian Ulster had already sworn, with religious determination, a Solemn Covenant "to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule parliament in Ireland." Under the determined leadership of a Tory lawyer, Edward Carson, and with the open support of the Tory Party under Bonar Law, Ulster began drilling and set up its own citizen army, the Ulster Volunteers, to defy the British Parliament by force of arms. Senior British Army officers took an enthusiastic interest in the movement and in March, 1914, 57 cavalry officers stationed at the Curragh, the Irish military headquarters, declared they would resign rather than fight the Volunteers. The following month, a large consignment of arms was illegally landed at Larne with the connivance of the British authorities.

In southern Ireland, events quickly took a similar course. The delay to the Home Rule Bill played into the hands of the extremists. The revolutionary socialist James Connolly had already founded the Irish Citizen Army during the Dublin strike and lock-out in October. Now the Irish Republic Brotherhood (the Fenians) sponsored the formation of a counterpart to the Ulster Volunteers: the Irish Volunteers. Hundreds of recruits came from among the ranks of those tired of waiting for Home Rule, including the poet Patrick Pearse and Eoin MacNeill, professor of early Irish history at University College, Dublin. In July, the Irish Volunteers staged their own arms landing at Howth – in broad daylight. The Castle attempted – unsuccessfully – to seize the arms, and in the ensuing commotion three civilians were shot by troops. There was a surge of public sympathy for the Volunteers. Reluctantly, Redmond blew with the wind and took over nominal leadership of the revolutionary forces he had attempted to contain. Ireland was on the verge of civil war when the First World War broke out.

The real leadership of the Volunteers was the secret directorate of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, repository of the revolutionary tradition of Irish nationalism that stretched back to the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s and to Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen in the 1790s. In 1916, this directorate, which now included James Connolly, Arthur Griffith, James Clarke and Patrick Pearse, revived the ancient adage "England's difficulty, Ireland's opportunity" and decided to try once again the old idea of insurrection aided by continental allies – this time Germany. With 150,000 Irishmen already in British uniform they felt, much as the United Irishmen felt in 1798, that they must strike at once or not at all if the flame of Irish nationalism was to be kept burning. They struck in Dublin on Easter Monday, 1916.

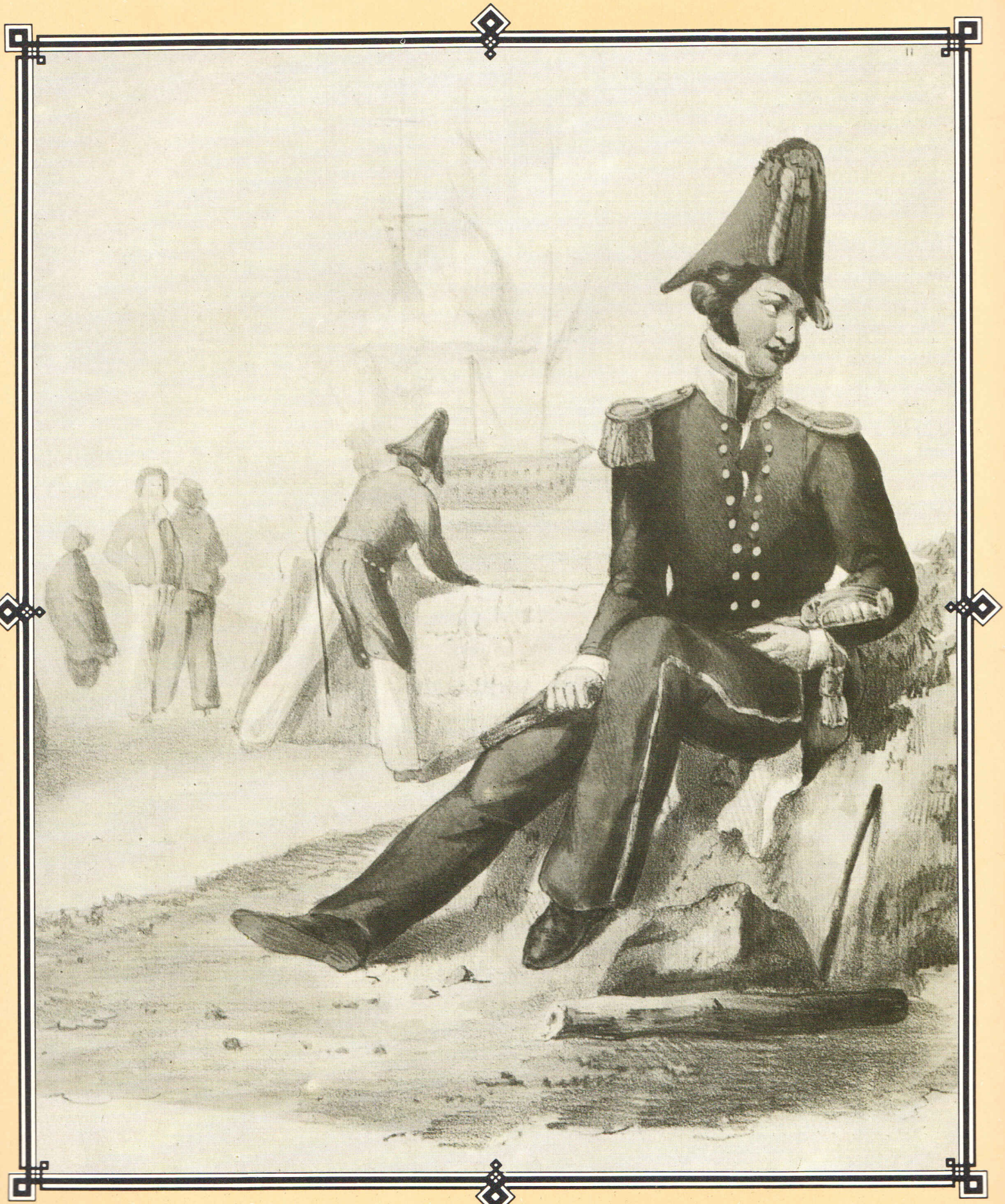
The Easter Rising, like the Insurrection of 1798, was bungled. As so often before, no foreign help came – except a German submarine to return Sir Roger Casement, an Irish nationalist who had had a distinguished career in the British consular service, from his unsuccessful mission to enlist aid in Berlin. He was arrested immediately on landing.

In addition, the leadership was divided. Until too late, the I.R.B. directorate led Eoin MacNeill, the Volunteers' chief of staff, to believe that nothing more was planned than "play-acting," as Dublin Castle termed Volunteer parades. When MacNeill discovered the truth, he countermanded the orders for insurrection. The directorate then issued counter-countermanding orders. As a result of this confusion, only about 2,000 out of 10,000 Volunteers, with about 200 men of the Irish Citizen Army, took part in the rising.

The British were taken by surprise. Dublin Castle was occupied. The rebels seized and held the General Post Office and from the steps Pearse proclaimed the establishment of the first Irish Republic: "In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom." By nightfall, almost the whole city centre was in rebel hands.

But it was hopeless. Dublin Castle was relieved within hours. On Tuesday British reinforcements arrived and artillery was brought into play. The General Post Office was gutted. On Saturday, Pearse surrendered unconditionally. Fifteen of the leaders were executed after secret courts martial, and Casement was later tried and hanged. As each day brought a new curt official announcement of the executions, Irish opinion all over the world turned to sympathy with the rebels, and then to anger.

For Ireland, it was a blood sacrifice. The revolutionary tradition, which had been kept alive by the most tenuous of threads since 1798, was stained into the consciousness of the nation. Home Rule – a new parliament in College Green – could never satisfy Irish nationalists now. For the honour of the martyred dead, the objective had to be total independence: Dublin Castle, captured only for a few hours in seven centuries of British rule, had to be seized for good. In the words of W.B. Yeats, Ireland had passed under "the tyranny of the dead." For Britain, the Easter Rising was the day of reckoning. At the least, Ireland could no longer be denied Home Rule; that was finally realized. But neither could Ulster be denied continuing integration in the United Kingdom. An Ireland of "West Britons," which Daniel O'Connell once proposed, was no longer possible. But equally, Pearse's united Irish republic was no longer possible. The consequence of partial conquest and partial colonization at last became clear: all that was possible was a partial solution, a partitioned Ireland, half nation and half colony; an Ireland tortured by disunity and division; an Ireland where the struggle has still to be decided today.



*Lieutenant, Royal Navy, 1829*