



# IBRG

## LAMBETH

### IRISH IN BRITAIN REPRESENTATION GROUP

#### THE ORIGINS OF RACISM

FACT SHEET 2

Modern racism began with the English exploitation of the Irish, was extended to the native Americans in the New World, and culminated there in African slavery.

The nature of Irish society must be examined to understand the policies of racism, servitude, displacement and extermination practiced by the English in Ireland, for ultimately the destruction of Celtic civilisation itself was the objective of English expansion. A.L. Rouse suggests that the Irish in the sixteenth century were as much from a strange and unknown culture as Indian chiefs from South America.

"No historian has brought home how different a world Ireland was . . . In the early days it was largely terra incognita, almost as unknown as the coast of America. The great Lord Deputy Chichester . . . wrote of Ulster that 'before these last wars it was as inaccessible to strangers as the Kingdom of China.'"

Gaelic Ireland was the largest society remaining of the ancient Atlantic coastal civilisation of several thousand years existence. It was untouched by the intrusions into England of Romans and German barbarians. The basic element of Irish culture was the pastoral lifestyle. Wealth was in the form of cattle. Fishing was important, along with oat growing. Following the planting of the oats, the greatest part of the Irish would move with their herds to summer camps (the booley) in the hills for grazing. In Ireland, tribal lands (those not owned by freemen or chiefs) were divided among the tribe for pastorage of their cattle. The land was not owned by the chief as a feudal domain; it was owned by the tribe and used privately following periodic divisions into pasture lands. Most of the arable land was owned by Irish freemen farmers. Tenancies of only one, two or three years - a short time in a farming society - gave the cattle-owning tenants freedom to move if the landowner demanded too many cattle for the use of the land.

But the pastoral economy, specifically the mobility of the Irish and their establishment of summer camps, were viewed by the English as evil for social and political reasons. A pastoral lifestyle produced less taxable wealth and made the Irish harder to control than a settled agricultural population. Without servitude the natives could freely choose to maintain their own economic and social lifestyle. Freedom and mobility were viewed as central to Irish resistance to domination.

The Brehons, or Irish tribal jurists, were an hereditary class who memorised the legal customs of the society and were consulted to settle disputes. Irish landowning concepts, marriage customs and monetary compensation in both criminal and civil cases operated smoothly through the Brehons. Criminal actions, including injuries and murder, were punished by compensation, usually in cattle. To the English, the Brehons were a special target for destruction. They were accused of bypassing the English courts and of encouraging actions which might be punishable by death under the rigorous legal system of Elizabethan society.

The Brehons provided refuge for Irishmen fleeing the execution of English legal processes. Like the Irish poets, Brehons were often very mobile, travelling around the countryside to learn the law and settle disputes, and thus were accused by the English of being the originators of the rebellions and uprisings against English rule. Especially shocking to the English were the matrimonial customs of the Irish. There were several forms of marriage among the Irish and these were dissolvable under certain none too rigid conditions by either party. In addition to concubinage, there was probationary marriage for a year and a day, and dissolution of bonds could be initiated by a woman as well as a man.

The attitude of the English conquerers toward the Irishman was one of contempt; some asserted that it was "no more a sin to kill an Irishman than a dog or any other brute". Yet, despite the original attitudes of superiority, more and more of the English conquerers found the Irish customs, culture and way of life superior. The Anglo-Normans were absorbed by the Irish in law, language and civilisation by free choice. During the 14th and 15th centuries, Gaelic revival had become complete. The reaction of England's officials was profound shock. In place of the hoped-for absorption of some of the Irish into English culture, the English were assimilated into Irish culture. The attractiveness of Irish culture compared to Anglo-Norman feudalism was desperately fought by the officials. To prevent English contamination by Irish culture, officials from at least 1297 A.D. introduced legal restrictions banning Irish dress, language, trade or marriage with the Irish, keeping Irish law-sayers or poets, etc.

Henry VII's intention to subdue the 'Irish savages' (1494) was undertaken more comprehensively, if unsuccessfully, during the reign of Henry VIII. The 'Decay of Ireland' (1520's) described how ineffectual would be English attempts to gain income from Ireland since even the Pale (the area of Ireland inhabited by the first English settlers) was dominated by Irish language, customs and law. Henry VIII soon abandoned the policy of voluntary submission to English control and established a standing army in Ireland. But coercion alone seemed unable to produce the results desired. The presence of the Irish in Ireland, and the absence of Englishmen there was one cause of the dominance of Irish law and the persistent absence of tax payments to the (English) government.

The government's solution was to settle more Englishmen in Ireland in order to recreate there English society who so willingly paid revenue to the government. During the decades before the middle of the 16th century "it was gradually realised that some permanent plantation of English settlers around strong defense centres would probably be the cheapest and most stable means" of gaining control and producing income for English government. In the 1550's with the reign of Philip and Mary clearly expansionist policies were inaugurated. Warfare against the Irish and the Irish-ised Anglo-Saxon (now called the Old English) was carried out from the military frontier of the Pale; they were expelled from the fertile regions where the land was confiscated by the government. Forts were established and English settlers (the New English) introduced. The New English assumed a semi-military character to maintain their positions against the Irish and Old English whose lands they occupied. This 'forward policy' was continued and intensified by the centralising programme of Elizabeth's regime.

How the natives were treated depended on how they reacted to being civilised and developed, i.e., exploited. If they accepted it, including the destruction of their cultural life, they were 'good-natured'. Early Tudor leaders hoped that the Irish, especially the mass of the Irish people, were 'good-natured', welcomed English rule

and civilisation, and preferred the 'freedom' of hard work for English landlords to the 'slavery' of the pastoral life in communities headed by Irish chieftains. Of course, this mild policy implied that whatever minimal resistance showed itself should be ruthlessly crushed for the benefit of the majority of well intentioned Irish. Colonisation by English settlers in key local areas was viewed as consistent with a mild policy. This policy was discarded once the English began to seriously attempt to establish control over the Irish. Resistance to exploitation and to (the) destruction of culture was viewed as the action of savages of bestial temperament who had to be forced into conformity or destroyed.

William Thomas, an official of Henry VIII, wrote of the Irish that they were "rude, beastly, ignorant, cruel and unruly infidels". Thomas in 'The Pilgrim: A Dialogue on the Life and Actions of Henry VIII' (1552) said: ". . . the wild Irish, as unreasonable beasts, lived without any knowledge of God or good manners, in common of their goods, cattle, women, children and every other thing . . . nor yet any justice executed for murder, robbery, or any other mischief; by the more force had ever the more reason. And thereof it followed that because their savage and idle life could not be satisfied with the only fruit of the natural unlaboured earth, therefore continually they invaded the fertile possessions of their Irish neighbors that inhabited the English pale".

The concept that the conquerors bring to the native people a slavery that is preferable to freedom under their own customs is used repeatedly by the English in their conquest of the Irish. With the accession of Queen Elizabeth the new programme for Ireland was administered by English officials influenced by Spanish colonisation. The major colonial project for Ulster at that time was organised in 1571. Elizabeth and Smith declared in their indenture agreement (Oct 5, 1571) that to repress the 'wild Irish' all the Irish gentry, freemen, craftsmen and learned class were to be driven out or killed, while the Irish labourers were to be retained to work for English gentry and English settlers. The Irish labourers were to be closely controlled to protect the English settlers dominance and to get profitable labour from them. The Nov. 16, 1571 letters patent to Smith said: "Every Irishman shall be forbidden (to) wear English apparel or weapon upon pain of death. That no Irishman, born of Irish race and brought up Irish, shall purchase land, bear office, be chosen of any jury or admitted witness in any real or personal action, nor be bound apprentice to any science or art . . . All Irishmen, especially native in that country which commonly be called churls, that will plow the ground and bear no kind of weapon nor armour, shall be gently entertained and for their plowing and labour shall be well rewarded with great provision".

However, Irish churls killed the head of that colony, the younger Thomas Smith. The failure of this colony along with that in Ulster proved to the English the need to eradicate most of the native population, and to then settle large numbers of Englishmen who might use a few well controlled Irishmen as labourers. Many of the figures active in Irish colonies joined with Sir Humphrey Gilbert in planning to settle English colonists in New England.

The experiences transferred in the early 17th century from Ireland to America were reinforced by the emerging attitudes of Puritanism which had a mutually destructive impact on the natives of America and of Ireland. America was viewed as a 'Western Canaan' reserved for the English generally and the Puritans in particular. As with the Irish, the Indians could not be integrated into that community; they were beyond the hedge, and thus enemies that would have to be eliminated.

Extermination was the logical conclusion. When extermination of human beings appears logical, the enslavement of human beings appears humane. Indians captured in war were placed in servitude; but as with the Irish, being in their own country and having free Indians beyond English control, the Indians were successful in escape.

The experience gained by the English regarding the Indians in America was transferred to Ireland during the English Civil War of the 1640's and 1650's. The Irish and Old English undertook a nationwide rebellion against the New English. This rebellion began in 1641. The radical soldiers who had won the (English) Civil War did not believe in the conquest of Ireland. These radicals or Levellers felt that the ". . . cause of the Irish natives in seeking their just freedoms was the very same with our cause here in endeavouring their own rescue and freedom from the power of oppressors". The radical council of officers voted on March 25, 1649 that the army should not be used in Ireland "to eradicate the natives or to divest them of their estates". Three days later the Leveller leaders were arrested by Cromwell.

Cromwell's army in Ireland, often New England Puritan led or inspired, carried out the most complete devastation that Ireland experienced until that time. Extermination became a policy. Massacres were carried out. Prisoners of war were transported to servitude in the new English colonies in the West Indies. Ireland, like New England, was taken with the Bible in one hand, the sword in the other. Cromwell determined that all the (remaining) Irish would be removed to the west of Ireland, ordering the Irish to go "to hell or to Connaught". But large numbers of prisoners of war and captives were sentenced to permanent transportation to the West Indian sugar plantations.

Thus there developed the well known horrors of the Irish 'slave-trade'. Large proportions of the Irish on the 'slave-trade' ships died on the voyage. The experience which the Bristol merchants gained in the Irish 'slave-trade' was useful to them decades later when they became a dominant force in the same activity in Africa. From the earliest English settlements in the West Indies (late 1620's) Irish slaves had been imported but were quickly found to be "proved treacherous". They frequently revolted and killed their English masters, and the English tried to outlaw the bringing in of Irish slaves. The white servant class was larger than the black in the English West Indies until the latter part of the 17th century. White servants were worse treated at this time than the black. The Irish were viewed as much more dangerous than the blacks. To explain this Ligon pointed out "that the blacks are fetched from several parts of Africa, who speak several languages, and by that means one of them understands not another. They could not, therefore, easily rebel".

In the following decades the white majorities were replaced with black majorities. The pastoral Irish were not used to intensive agricultural labour. It was totally contrary to their traditions, customs and experiences. Not unlike the Indians to which they were so frequently compared, the Irish, as the English had constantly said, would not submit to the kind of agricultural work which feudalism had demanded. The Indian tended to escape or die; the Irish either resisted work discipline, tending towards "idleness" or they rebelled.

The English had already formed their racial attitudes towards people totally foreign in speech, religion, culture and, even as this had for them a cultural differentiation, colour. The conflict of cultures

which dominated relations between the English and the Irish in the Old and New Worlds and the English and the Indians in the New World did not have the same intensity regarding the Africans. The most extreme aspects of the racism which accompanied the rise of the nation-state and colonialism, namely the extermination which was practiced against the Irish and the Indians was not applied against the Africans. The Irish and the Indians could not be a part of the organic community which received its biggest manifestation in the Puritan villages.

The Englishman, using the Irish or the Indians, sought to recreate the English village society in which a large mass of servile Englishmen laboured for the privileged feudal class. The destruction of the native Irish or Indian culture was necessary to accomplish that; their resistance meant that not only would they refuse to submit to English culture but would not accept the English seizure of lands they considered their own. Even when transported (as slaves) to the West Indies the Irish and the Indians resisted.

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Extracts from 'ENGLISH ORIGINS OF AMERICAN RACISM' by Leonard Liggio (Director of the Institute for Humane Studies, Menlo Park, California).

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