HISTORY OF IRELAND

Early Irish History

Historians estimate that Ireland was first settled by humans at a relatively late stage in European terms – about 10,000 years ago. Around 4000 BC it is estimated that the first farmers arrived in Ireland. Farming marked the arrival of the new Stone Age. Around 300 BC, Iron Age warriors known as the Celts came to Ireland from mainland Europe. The Celts had a huge influence on Ireland. Many famous Irish myths stem from stories about Celtic warriors. The current first official language of the Republic of Ireland, Irish (or Gaeilge) stems from Celtic language.

Early Christian Ireland

Following the arrival of Saint Patrick and other Christian missionaries in the early to mid-5th century, Christianity took over the indigenous pagan religion by the year 600 AD. Irish Christian scholars excelled in the study of Latin, Greek and Christian theology in monasteries throughout Ireland. The arts of manuscript illumination, metalworking and sculpture flourished and produced such treasures as the Book of Kells, ornate jewellery, and the many carved stone crosses that can still be seen across the country.

The Viking Era

At the end of the 8th century and during the 9th century Vikings, from where we now call Scandinavia, began to invade and then gradually settle into and mix with Irish society. The Vikings founded, Dublin, Ireland’s capital city in 988. Following the defeat of the Vikings by Brian Boru, the High King of Ireland, at Clontarf in 1014, Viking influence faded.

The Norman Era

The 12th century saw the arrival of the Normans. The Normans built walled towns, castles and churches. They also increased agriculture and commerce in Ireland.

Plantations and Penal Laws

After King Henry VIII declared himself head of the Church in England in 1534 he ensured that the Irish Parliament declared him King of Ireland in 1541. From this time up to the late 17th century, an official English policy of ‘plantation’ led to the arrival of thousands of English and Scottish Protestant settlers. The most successful plantation occurred in Ulster. From this period on, sectarian conflict became a common theme in Irish history.

The 17th century was a bloody one in Ireland. It culminated in the imposition of the harsh regime of Penal laws. These laws set about disempowering Catholics, denying them, for
example, the right to take leases or own land above a certain value, outlawing Catholic clergy, forbidding higher education and entry to the professions, and imposing oaths of conformity to the state church, the Church of Ireland. During the 18th century strict enforcement of the Penal laws eased but by 1778 Catholics held only about 5% of the land in Ireland.

**Union with Great Britain**

In 1782 a Parliamentary faction led by Henry Grattan (a Protestant) successfully agitated for a more favourable trading relationship with England and for greater legislative independence for the Parliament of Ireland. However, London still controlled much of what occurred in Ireland. Inspired by the French Revolution, in 1791 an organisation called the United Irishmen was formed with the ideal of bringing Irish people of all religions together to reform and reduce Britain’s power in Ireland. Its leader was a young Dublin Protestant called Theobald Wolfe Tone. The United Irishmen were the inspiration for the armed rebellion of 1798. Despite attempts at help from the French the rebellion failed and in 1801 the Act of Union was passed uniting Ireland politically with Britain.

In 1829 one of Ireland’s greatest leaders Daniel O’Connell, known as ‘the great liberator’ was central in getting the Act of Catholic Emancipation passed in the parliament in London. He succeeded in getting the total ban on voting by Catholics lifted and they could now also become Members of the Parliament in London.

After this success O’Connell aimed to cancel the Act of Union and re-establish an Irish parliament. However, this was a much bigger task and O’Connell’s approach of non-violence was not supported by all. Such political issues were overshadowed however by the worst disaster and tragedy in Irish history – the great famine.

**The Great Famine**

Potatoes were the staple food of a growing population at the time. When blight (a form of plant disease) struck potato crops nationwide in 1845, 1846 and 1847 disaster followed. Potatoes were inedible and people began to starve to death. The response of the British government also contributed to the disaster – trade agreements were still controlled by London. While hundreds of thousands of people were suffering from extreme hunger, Ireland was forced to export abundant harvests of wheat and dairy products to Britain and further overseas.

Between 1845 and 1851 two million people died or were forced to emigrate from Ireland. The population of Ireland has never since reached its pre-famine level of approximately 8 million.

Ireland’s history of emigration continued from this point onwards with the majority of Irish emigrants going to the United States of America.

**Home Rule**

There was little effective challenge to Britain’s control of Ireland until the efforts of Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-91). At the age of 31 he became leader of the Irish Home Rule Party, which became the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1882.
While Parnell did not achieve Home Rule (or self-government), his efforts and widely recognised skills in the House of Commons earned him the title of ‘the uncrowned king of Ireland’. The impetus he gave to the idea of Home Rule was to have lasting implications.

In Ulster in the north of Ireland the majority of people were Protestants. They were concerned about the prospect of Home Rule being granted as they would be a Protestant minority in an independent Ireland with a Catholic majority. They favoured the union with Britain. The Unionist Party was lead by Sir Edward Carson. Carson threatened an armed struggle for a separate Northern Ireland if independence was granted to Ireland.

A Home Rule Bill was passed in 1912 but crucially it was not brought into law. The Home Rule Act was suspended at the outbreak of World War One in 1914. Many Irish nationalists believed that Home Rule would be granted after the war if they supported the British war effort. John Redmond the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party encouraged people to join the British forces and many did join. However, a minority of nationalists did not trust the British government leading to one of the most pivotal events in Irish history, the Easter Rising.

**Easter Rising**

On April 24th (Easter Monday) 1916, two groups of armed rebels, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army seized key locations in Dublin. The Irish Volunteers were led by Padraig Pearse and the Irish Citizen Army was led by James Connolly. Outside the GPO (General Post Office) in Dublin city centre, Padraig Pearse read the Proclamation of the Republic which declared an Irish Republic independent of Britain. Battles ensued with casualties on both sides and among the civilian population. The Easter Rising finished on April 30th with the surrender of the rebels. The majority of the public was actually opposed to the Rising. However, public opinion turned when the British administration responded by executing many of the leaders and participants in the Rising. All seven signatories to the proclamation were executed including Pearse and Connolly.

Two of the key figures who were involved in the rising who avoided execution were Éamon de Valera and Michael Collins. In the December 1918 elections the Sinn Féin party led by Éamon de Valera won a majority of the Ireland based seats of the House of Commons. On the 21st of January 1919 the Sinn Féin members of the House of Commons gathered in Dublin to form an Irish Republic parliament called Dáil Éireann, unilaterally declaring power over the entire island.

**War of Independence**

What followed is known as the ‘war of independence’ when the Irish Republican Army – the army of the newly declared Irish Republic – waged a guerilla war against British forces from 1919 to 1921. One of the key leaders of this war was Michael Collins. In December 1921 a treaty was signed by the Irish and British authorities. While a clear level of independence was finally granted to Ireland the contents of the treaty were to split Irish public and political opinion. One of the sources of division was that Ireland was to be divided into Northern Ireland (6 counties) and the Irish Free State (26 counties) which was established in 1922.
Civil War

Such was the division of opinion in Ireland that a Civil War followed from 1922 to 1923 between pro and anti treaty forces, with Collins (pro-treaty) and de Valera (anti-treaty) on opposing sides. The consequences of the Civil war can be seen to this day where the two largest political parties in Ireland have their roots in the opposing sides of the civil war – Fine Gael (pro-treaty) and Fianna Fáil (anti-treaty). A period of relative political stability followed the Civil war.

Northern Ireland

Under the same Government of Ireland Act of 1920 that created the Irish Free State, the Parliament of Northern Ireland was created. The Parliament consisted of a majority of Protestants and while there was relative stability for decades this was to come to an end in the late 1960s due to systematic discrimination against Catholics.

1968 saw the beginning of Catholic civil rights marches in Northern Ireland which led to violent reactions from some Protestant loyalists and from the police force. What followed was a period known as ‘the Troubles’ when nationalist/republican and loyalist/unionist groups clashed.

In 1969 British troops were sent to Derry and Belfast to maintain order and to protect the Catholic minority. However, the army soon came to be seen as a tool of the Protestant majority by the minority Catholic community. This was reinforced by events such as Bloody Sunday in 1972 when British forces opened fire on a Catholic civil rights march in Derry killing 13 people. An escalation of paramilitary violence followed with many atrocities committed by both sides. The period of ‘the Troubles’ are generally agreed to have finished with the Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement of April 10th 1998.

Between 1969 and 1998 it is estimated that well over 3,000 people were killed by paramilitary groups on opposing sides of the conflict.

Since 1998 considerable stability and peace has come to Northern Ireland. In 2007 former bitterly opposing parties the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin began to cooperate in government together in Northern Ireland.

Republic of Ireland – 20th Century to present day

The 1937 Constitution re-established the state as the Republic of Ireland.

In 1973 Ireland joined the European Economic Community (now the European Union).

In the 1980s the Irish economy was in recession and large numbers of people emigrated for employment reasons. Many young people emigrated to the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia.

Economic reforms in the 1980s along with membership of the European Community (now European Union) created one of the world’s highest economic growth rates. Ireland in the 1990s, so long considered a country of emigration, became a country of immigration. This period in Irish history was called the Celtic Tiger.