

Week 4: The British and the Irish: the oldest colony

Ireland was a colony of Britain until 1922 and the Six Counties that make up Northern Ireland are still part of the United Kingdom. In April 1916, the Easter Rising in Dublin was the first revolutionary protest against the British Empire. The Rising failed and the ringleaders were executed, but it pushed open the gates to an independent, but not united, Ireland

Ireland and the world celebrated the Centenary of the Rising throughout 2016. What might have been a testing time for Britain and Ireland, given their

their difficult shared history, passed in a spirit of grace and patience and the acknowledgement that Britain was not the only source of Ireland's troubles.



Still, some of the worst years of the Anglo-Irish relationship followed the 1916 Rising, as a beleaguered Britain sought to quell Irish nationalism with a war of attrition fought in the villages and valleys of Ireland by the 'Black and



Tans', the Royal Irish Constabulary Special Reserve, who destroyed and laid siege to many small towns and villages in Ireland, and sacked Cork, Ireland's second city in the south-west. The Tans are still hated in Ireland and the term 'Black and Tans' still stirs very negative reactions because of their extreme brutality against suspected nationalist and, too often, innocent civilians in the years 1919-22.

Besides the political differences and tensions, which go back to Cromwell and well beyond the Troubles of the 1970s-90s, Britain has long been a second home for many Irish people seeking a way out of grinding poverty in the countryside and drabness in the towns and cities. Over six million people or 10% of the population of the United Kingdom have at least one Irish grandparent. Ireland's relationship with Britain is unique in every possible way – politically, economically, culturally, legally and in terms of people-to-people links.

Six million people with an Irish grandparent is a lot of hard decisions, many difficult journeys, many long years of separation, exile, fortitude and loneliness. An Irishman would leave his home and his family and come to, say, London, find a room and look for work. By and large, most of the work available for Irish people in Britain has been unskilled labour and Irishmen have, over the centuries, built Britain's waterways (the canals), its railways and its subways, , and its buildings. Whole areas of Britain's cities have been traditionally occupied by Irish people. In London, Paddington, Kings Cross, Holloway, Camden Town and Willesden have all been Irish areas that have now become gentrified.

In the building trade an informal network known as 'the Murphias' has traditionally taken care of Irish working men in the United Kingdom. The jobs are there, but so are the feelings of loneliness and not belonging that many Irish people have had to cope with, even in traditionally Irish areas of the UK.

Britain, Ireland and the United States



The United States is home to 35,000,000 Americans of Irish descent. Irish-Americans have long formed a powerful lobby for Irish political and commercial interests. In the US, the Irish have dominated big city politics in Chicago, New York (Tammany Hall) and Boston (the ‘next Parish over’), the three recipients of large numbers of Irish immigrants. When American politicians refer to the ‘Catholic’ vote, they are acknowledging the political power and emotive importance of nationalist loyalties in the United States.

British policy in Ireland and in Northern Ireland has over the years become adapted to this powerful constituency, most of whom are strong believers in the cause of a united Ireland, where Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland together become the nation that rules the island of Ireland.

Britain, Ireland and Brexit

Britain's decision to leave the EU [Brexit = Britain's exit from the EU] affects

Ireland in many ways. The fall of sterling has hurt Irish exporters, who sell £15bn of products in Britain every year. In the business world almost 60,000 UK company directors are Irish-born. The Dublin-London route is the second busiest air route in Europe. Britain and Ireland trade goods worth over €1.2bn a week, and Ireland is the UK's fifth largest trading partner.

There are valuable upsides for Ireland in Brexit, not least that banks now in the City of London and other financial institutions could move their business to Dublin in order to continue to enjoy the 'passporting' benefits that go to banks and financial institutions operating inside the European Union.

Since Britain voted to leave the European Union on June 23rd 2016, 37,000 British people have applied for Irish passports and Irish citizenship in order to continue to benefit from EU citizenship. Now, the border between Northern Ireland (whose people voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union) and the Republic of Ireland, which is in the EU, may have to be 'hardened' as Ireland and the UK no longer belong to the same group of nations. There is uncertainty over what will happen to the border after Brexit. Few want a return to a 'hard border', yet fully open British frontiers seem destined to disappear.

The emotional connection

For most of the 19th and 20th centuries, the attitude of the British ruling class to the Irish people have wandered between deep respect for Irish literature, Irish writers, painters and poets, and a mixture of jealousy and contempt for the average Irish person. The Irish have been seen as a feckless, pleasure loving people who cannot be trusted to manage their own affairs. The British attitude has been that of a sober, dutiful older brother worried about the foolish ways of his feckless younger brother.

When the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Éamon de Valera (1882–1975) decided in 1939 that Ireland would be neutral in the Second World War, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, saw the decision as an act of treachery. Ireland had gained de facto independence from Britain after the Anglo-Irish War. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 declared Ireland to be a sovereign state and Ireland had every right not to join Britain in its fight against Germany and the Axis powers. Nevertheless, many Britons saw neutrality as proof that their dim younger brother had lost his way.