

Changes to irish historiography and historical debate



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Discuss the growth of Irish historiography and historical debate since the 1960's with specific reference to at least two of the following areas: women's history, social history, labour history, economic history, local history, the history of the diaspora.

There has been without a doubt a growth in Irish historiography and historical debate since the 1960's. The following will discuss and examine the reasons for the growth of Irish historiography and historical debate. Irish historiography had tended to focus on the relationship between England (and later Britain) and Ireland with its consequences for both countries' developments and history. Irish historiography also highlighted key events that proved pivotal in shaping the Irish nation. Such events include the English invasions from the 12th century, the reformation, the plantations of Ulster, the consequences of the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution. Further defining moments were also the development of Irish Republicanism that was shown by the 1798 rebellion and the emergence of the Fenian Brotherhood during the 19th century. The potato famine of the 1840's would prove disastrous to the Irish population whilst encouraging immigration to Britain, the United States and Australia. Such immigration will as examined lead to the development of the diaspora. The way in which Ireland was partitioned to account for the two versions of Irish nationalism has become the central theme of historical debate. The Civil Rights Movement within the Roman Catholic community of Northern Ireland which inadvertently led to the troubles will be evaluated as to whether that is the prime motivator of changes in Irish historiography and historical debate.

Prior to the English involvement Ireland was an independent if divided country. One historical debate is whether the English were good or bad for Ireland. It had been influenced by mainly Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Viking settlements. ^[1] Irish culture was Gaelic and Christian in character. The English that came to Ireland were descendants of the Normans that ruthlessly conquered England a century before. In contrast to William the Conqueror these Anglo-Norman invaders did not intend to stay and were invited to cross the Irish Sea to join in with a conflict between Gaelic chieftains. For the Irish the involvement of the Anglo-Norman in their affairs was a monumental change in their destiny. From Henry II English Kings came to regard stability in Ireland as an important part of their security. The accident of geography was to lead to the inter relationship between the English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish that has brought both benefits and disasters to all concerned. There are people who believe that the English or British brought benefits to the Irish will tend to stress the good consequences of their involvement rather than the bad. Those who have an anti-English outlook stress the harmful consequences, ^[2]

Henry II himself was not in a hurry to invade Ireland; his possessions in France and England took priority. However once the English arrived in 1172 they would not be removed by the Irish for centuries, and even then not from the whole of Ireland. ^[3] English control of Ireland was never complete and centred around Dublin. The amount of control fluctuated depending on the power and interest of the King. Strong Kings such as Edward IV and Henry VII attempted to increase their power in Ireland. It was to be Henry VIII that would alter the shape of Irish history as much as he changed that of England.

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Henry VIII was a man of great ambition, in 1541 he proclaimed himself King of Ireland, thus showing the intention of gaining greater control of Ireland. [4]

The Tudors made their control of Ireland effective if not complete yet at the cost of sowing future conflict over religion, politics and the status of Ireland. Henry VIII had already attempted to gain the loyalty of the Irish nobility and gain control over the Irish church. After the break from Rome, Henry was determined to introduce the Church of England to his Irish subjects as well as his English subjects. The Reformation would further complicate the relationship between the Irish and English. The Reformation was slow to take root in Ireland; the Roman Catholic Church maintained its strength in the majority of the island, especially in rural areas. Whilst the Irish parliament faithfully followed the religious legislation roller coaster ride seen in England the Irish did not follow suit. Ironically it was the Roman Catholic, Mary I that came up with the strategy that would change Irish society and economy as profoundly as it affected its politics and religion, the plantations. [5]

The Irish did not accept those changes without resisting. The most serious threat to the Tudor hold on Ireland came with the Earl of Tyrone's rebellion of the 1590's that was not finally put down until 1604. [6] Despite that rebellion James VI of Scotland inherited Ireland under the crown's control when he gained the English throne. [7] James I greatly expanded the plantations in particular to the Irish province of Ulster. The protestant settlers gained land off of the Irish population of Ulster in return for their loyalty to Britain. The settlers would be given social and economic advantages by the government that persisted into the 20th century and was <https://assignbuster.com/changes-to-irish-historiography-and-historical-debate/>

deeply resented by the Roman Catholic communities. That resentment contributed to the rebellion of 1641 that attacked the plantations. Irish nationalists and republicans regard the plantations as a prime example of British imperialism whilst Unionists regard them as the foundation of their communities. ^[8] The rebellion in Ireland sparked off the English Civil War, there was in effect Civil Wars in England, Scotland and Ireland that would result in much bloodshed and the removal of Charles I. The situation in Ireland was complicated; there were those that supported the English parliament and those that wished to use the Civil Wars as an opportunity to gain independence. All Irish opposition to the English parliament was ruthlessly suppressed by Oliver Cromwell and resulted in the massacre of Drogheda. Oliver Cromwell remains associated with bloody repression and the use of terror to this day, the paradox of an English republican with Imperial policies. ^[9] The Irish Catholic community would remain loyal to James II who lost his Irish kingdom after his English and Scottish ones. The victory of William of Orange only reinforced the British bias in favour of the Ulster Protestants. The Protestants liked to show their loyalty to Britain through their Orange orders and apprentice boys' marches, a source of sectarian friction for more than three centuries. Whilst the Unionists see these as symbols of their British nationality, the Catholic communities see them as symbols of their continued rule from Britain. ^[10]

The consequences of these events were two rival senses of nationalism developed in Ireland. There were many of the Irish population that remained overwhelmingly poor, rural and Roman Catholic wishing for independence from Britain or at least autonomy. The other form of nationalism was that

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centred on the Ulster Protestants that saw themselves as British and did not want independence and would only accept more autonomy if their special status were maintained. Some of these Protestants were also poor but regarded themselves as better than their Catholic peers. There was an upsurge in Irish nationalism following in the wake of the American War of Independence and the French Revolution that culminated in the rebellion of 1798. The French had done their best to cause trouble in Ireland yet proved incapable of supporting the rebellion. The failure of that rebellion led to rebels such as Wolfe Tone joining the Diaspora and the union of Ireland with Great Britain. The population of Ireland grew rapidly especially with the introduction of the potato. The economy started to develop especially in Belfast and other parts of Ulster that produced linen and ships. Dublin and Belfast also grew to rapid urbanisation. ^[11]

Potato blight brought famine to Ireland drastically reduced the population through starvation and immigration whilst showing the British government as inept during the crisis. ^[12] There have certainly been many debates around the Potato Famine, which centred on those that did not wish to become too involved in describing the consequences and the revisionists that its consequences could not be overemphasised. Perhaps one of the most important revisionist works was Cecil Woodham-Smith's 'The Great Hunger' written in 1962 and tried to examine if the famine could have been averted or at least alleviated. The main debate concerns who was to blame for the famine, the British government on its own or others either singly or in various combinations. ^[13] The Potato Famine of 1845-47 would lead to demands for Home Rule and Land Reform whilst it also convinced Irish <https://assignbuster.com/changes-to-irish-historiography-and-historical-debate/>

Catholics that the British government did not care about them. There had been earlier famines, for instance that of 1739-41, yet none became as notorious as the one of 1845-47. ^[14] On balance most historians now seem to edge their bets when apportioning blame for the famine. However at the time many in Ireland blamed the British government for not acting quickly enough. Perceptions can often be more powerful than fact, the image of British indifference has been far more enduring than the countless number of British individuals that attempted to help the Irish. ^[15] The emigration from Ireland that followed was remarkable, between the start of the potato famine and partition four million Irish left for the United States, Australia and Britain. The Irish -American communities can assert great political influence in the United States which is why Irish Republicans, Ulster Unionists, Irish and British governments will try to influence American policy towards Ireland. ^[16]

Concession from the British government over Land Reform were gained with relative ease which many poor labourers across the country at limited expense to absentee landlords. It was to be the campaigns for and against Home Rule that caused much controversy then much later amongst historians. Home Rule was campaigned for by Irish MPs spearheaded with great skill by Charles Stewart Parnell. The Liberal governments led by Gladstone favoured Home Rule yet were unable to make headway against the Conservatives and Liberal backbenchers opposed to it or the Ulster Protestants. Home Rule caused some of Gladstone's least successful moments. However it was the Asquith government that actually passed Home Rule legislation in the face of almost insurrectionist Unionist

opposition only to have it delayed by the First World War. ^[17] That war saw the majority of Irish back the British war effort. However, it gave the IRA chance to launch the Easter Rising in 1916. The Easter Rising was put down by the British Army but gave the Irish Republican Movement martyrs. ^[18] The war the IRA waged using the tactics of Michael Collins forced the British government to peace talks and the partition of Ireland. The British called the IRA terrorists whilst the Republicans referred to them as freedom fighters. The IRA did not gain independence for all of Ireland just 26 counties. The Ulster Protestants in Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom whilst Civil War broke out in the Irish Free State leading to the deaths of Michael Collins and Arthur Griffiths amongst others. Despite public statements to the contrary even hard-line republicans such as Eamon de Valera accepted the partition. ^[19]

The partition of 1921 showed that neither the British or the Irish Republicans could gain total victory. The Ulster Protestants were content with having Home Rule in Northern Ireland and denying Roman Catholics their civil rights and any real political influence. The Roman Catholic minority in Northern Ireland felt let down by the Republic of Ireland for not fighting for a united Ireland and uninterested in a state they did not want to belong to and did nothing to protect their rights. ^[20] Despite making a claim to aim towards a united Ireland in its constitution, the Irish Republic left Northern Ireland alone. As for the Republican campaigns of the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's they were ineffective. The harsh economic climate of the depression of the 1930's did more to set off sectarian violence than radicalism. ^[21] The 1960's

were to witness a change of attitude amongst the nationalist and republican communities that resulted in the civil rights movements, a violent backlash from the Unionists. The British Army was brought in to stop sectarian violence yet provided the Provincial IRA with a reason to launch a long running armed struggle. In part the civil rights movement had been encouraged by the attempted political, social and economic reforms of Northern Irish Prime Minister O'Neill, with similar aims of ending discrimination against Catholics. The events of 1969 seemed to catch all sides by surprise. [22]

The emergence of the troubles in Northern Ireland did lead to a change in the historiography of Ireland. That occurred either to justify the actions of one faction against the others yet also by others as a means of explaining the conflict. Republicans justified their actions by maintaining that Irish history was dominated by the struggle to be free of British rule. They were merely carrying on the struggle that Wolfe Tone and Michael Collins had given their lives for. More moderate nationalist opinion could point to trying to achieve their objectives through peaceful means, following the sample set by the moderate campaigners for Home Rule of the previous century and the more recent civil rights movement. [23] The Unionists defended the existence of Northern Ireland arguing that it was a just and pragmatic partition of Ireland that maintained their right to remain within the United Kingdom, a right that was theirs as they were formed the majority of the Northern Irish population. [24] Another impact of the Troubles was that it led to a renewed interest in studying the Anglo-Irish War and the subsequent partition of Ireland. Republican opinion had often seen the agreement to the partition as <https://assignbuster.com/changes-to-irish-historiography-and-historical-debate/>

a great betrayal rather than the IRA military leadership getting the best deal it could. However there was the opposing perspective of the British and the Ulster Unionists that partitioning Ireland had been the only viable option as neither the British nor the IRA could decisively defeat the other. Perhaps one important perspective that the Provisional IRA and Sinn Fein missed was that circumstances surrounding the Anglo-Irish War were uniquely favourable. The Easter Rising had strengthened the resolve to gain independence whilst the human and financial costs of the First World War meant that the British government did not want a long war in Ireland. [25]

Therefore Irish historical debate and historiography has changed as a result of the troubles in Northern Ireland. That was partly due to different sides trying to justify their cause and to historians trying to explain the causes of the troubles and the Irish problem. As explained the roots of the Irish problem can be traced back to the first English invasions of the 12th century.

Those who support the Unionist perspective emphasise the positive aspects of British involvement pointing out that Ireland would have been poorer and less civilised without it. Those that examine Irish history from a nationalist or republican perspective tend to blame the British for everything that has gone wrong in Ireland and that there would not have been an Irish problem without British interference. Traditional historical debate usually tried to argue in favour of one perspective rather than another, whilst revisionists have tried to look at all factors involved without apportioning blame or praise to any sole actor in Irish history. Some also tried to look at Irish history from

a Marxist perspective. This approach has been most popular with republicans as justification for their struggle against the British.

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Footnotes

[1] Moody & Martin, 2001, p. 95

[2] Stewart, 2001, p. 26

[3] Morgan, 1989, p. 24

[4] Moody & Martin, 2001, p. 139

[5] Gardiner & Wenborn, 1995, p. 417

[6] Schama, 2000, p. 389

[7] Moody & Martin, 2001, p. 139

[8] Lockyer, 1989, p. 302

[9] Schama, 2001, p. 203

[10] Kennedy-Pipe 1998 p. 9

[11] Hobsbawm 1975 p. 209

[12] Kinealy 1997 p. 5

[13] Kinealy, 1997, pp. 6-7

[14] Stewart, 2001, p. 106

[15] Stewart, 2001 p. 153

[16] Ardagh, 1994, p. 305

[17] Kennedy-Pipe, 1998 p. 13

[18] Fitzpatrick, 1998 p. 59

[19] Fitzpatrick 1998 p. 35

[20] Stewart, 2001 p. 174

[21] Moody & Martin 2001 p. 269

[22] Kennedy – Pipe 1998 p. 37

[23] Moody & Martin 2001 p. 291

[24] Gardiner & Wenborn 1995 p. 767

[25] Stewart 2001 p. 171