

The Act of Union

*(This is the fourth in our series of articles on the risings in 1798 and their impact on Irish history. The first article described Wolfe Tone's leadership; the second, the rising in Wexford,- and the third, the **Battle of Ballinamuck.**)*

Revolution was in the air in the late eighteenth century. England had lost the American colonies; France had dethroned its king; Ireland once again had tried to drive England out of Ireland in the risings of 1798, demonstrating to the English that to its west was anything but an ally. George Channing asked a question that many in authority in England must have asked themselves after the French Revolution: "Where is the country where the state of society is so adapted to receive, cherish and mature the principles of the French revolution-- principles which go to array the lower orders of people against the educated and governing part of the community, to arm poverty against property, Tabour against privilege and each class of life against its superior, than a country like Ireland?"

Would that Ireland were more like Scotland, George III might have prayed in the 1790's. Less than a hundred years earlier (1707), Scotland had united with England to the benefit of both. England had brought prosperity to Scotland: Glasgow had grown into a major port, and Scotland had brought prestige to England in the form of the intellectual capital which writers like James Boswell and Adam Smith generated. When the French landed in Ireland in support of the United Irishmen in 1798, the concept of a union of England and Ireland, not a new idea, was put at the top of England's political agenda. In spite of enormous opposition, the Act of Union was approved by the Irish Parliament, signed by the king on 1 August 1800, and on 1 January 1801 the United Kingdom of England and Ireland was born.

Prior to Union, Ireland had been ruled for over four hundred years by its own Parliament. To be sure, this was not a truly Irish Parliament, nor an independent Parliament. Not truly Irish because Catholics could not vote until 1793, and Catholics never had the right to sit in the Irish Parliament. Not truly independent because the executive branch of government, the Lord Lieutenant, was appointed by the crown and was not answerable to the Parliament. Furthermore, Poyning's Law, imposed on Ireland in 1495, restricted the Irish Parliament from taking action on any law that was not pre-certified by the crown. But in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Irish Parliament, led by MP Henry Grattan, persuaded the crown to allow more independence. One result of liberalization was the Irish Constitution of 1782 which modified Poyning's Law. There can be little doubt that the American Revolution of 1776 contributed to Westminster's allowing the Irish Parliament more freedom than it had ever had. In spite of these liberalizations, Ireland was still ruled in the late eighteenth century by a colonial oligarchy: a minority rule which was protected by a lukewarm home government.

Reforming the Irish Parliament was soon to lose out, however, to a push to Union. Many in the power structure in London did not trust Dublin to manage Ireland in England's best interests. They had seen that it was only the "Protestant winds" which had prevented Wolfe Tone and 30,000 French troops from landing in Ireland in 1796. They had seen English soldiers fighting Irish rebels in Arklow, Wicklow, and Antrim, and French soldiers supporting the Irish at Castlebar and Ballinamuck in 1798. They rightly feared that the concepts of a republic and of majority rule, concepts alien to English rule in Ireland, might have been released into the air for the Irish to breathe. Breathe they did, history tells us.

It was the responsibility of Lord Lieutenant Charles Cornwallis, whom we know from his surrender to George Washington at Yorktown and from his victory over the Irish and French at Ballinamuck, to persuade the Irish Parliament to dissolve itself. Those who resisted Union pointed out fears of higher taxes, of an increase of absentee landlords as the wealthy fled to the seat of power, and of the decline of Dublin as a major European city. Some members of the Irish Parliament, such as Thomas Goold, stressed Ireland's unique identity: "Our patent to be a state and not a shire comes directly from Heaven... The great creator of the world has given unto our beloved country the gigantic outlines of a kingdom and not the pygmy features of a province. God and Nature, I say, never intended Ireland to be a province, and by God she never shall."

The English who favored Union countered these arguments against Union by emphasizing issues of security and prosperity. English capital, they argued, would flow to a stable Ireland, raising the standard of living of all Irish people. The Irish would in time adopt British social practices, becoming "West Britons," a boon to order and stability. To the fearful Orange Order, advocates for Union pointed out that the numbers within Union favored the Protestants: In Ireland they were a three to eleven minority that would be overwhelmed when Catholics got the right to vote, while in Union the Irish Protestants would be part of an eleven to three majority.

No doubt these arguments helped somewhat to win Union, but some say Cornwallis' most persuasive argument with members of the Irish Parliament was British pounds. Passage of the Union was a "buyout," with one and a quarter million pounds paid out in "compensation for disturbance," and with peerages and pensions awarded. The Lord Lieutenant who succeeded Cornwallis complained that he found a "heavy mortgage on the patronage of the country."

The Act of Union brought twenty-eight Irish peers and four Irish bishops into the House of Lords. One hundred Irish members of Parliament were seated in a Parliament of 658 seats. The two established churches were combined as the Established Churches of England and Ireland. There was a smooth transition to Union that was only slightly disrupted by Robert Emmet's revolt in Dublin in 1803. Since the Irish public at large had no stake in the Grattan Parliament or in the Parliaments which preceded it, the majority of the Irish did not miss the Irish Parliament. Those in power before Union were in power after the Union. The causes of domestic strife before the Union were the same as after the Union. What seemed to have worked for the Scots, we know from history, did not work for the Irish.

One of the many ironies of the Union of England and Ireland is that by the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was clear the Union had failed to deliver the Irish Catholics into the bosom of the English, is that people began to look back to the Ireland of the eighteenth century as the halcyon days of Ireland. By mid-century, Ireland was not prosperous, the Irish majority had not been assimilated, Catholics had not gained any advantages, and the Great Hunger had exposed England's own attitude toward its Irish "citizens."

Union benefited northeast Ireland and its majority Protestant, mostly Presbyterian, population. Ulster enjoyed general industrial expansion and prosperity under Union in the nineteenth century. Jobs abounded in the linen mills, the ship yards, and the metal works plants in Ulster. When talk of repeal of the Union surfaced, fear of the Church of Rome and fear of absorption into the ailing economy of the rest of Ireland inclined the Protestants of the northeast to reject such talk with vehemence.

The Repeal Movement was [Daniel O'Connell](#)'s shining hour. Although the Catholic Relief Act of 1793 had given Catholics a limited right to vote and although William Pitt, Prime Minister, was a supporter of expanding Catholic emancipation to permit Catholics to hold office, no change in status for Catholics had occurred under Union. O'Connell and his Catholic Association began to agitate for Catholic emancipation in 1823. Defying the law, in 1828 O'Connell ran for a seat in the House of Commons from a district in Clare, won, and defied Parliament not to seat him. Fearing an angry Ireland, the king reluctantly took the advice of his political advisors and signed a bill which allowed Catholics to hold seats in Parliament.

Daniel O'Connell launched the Repeat Movement in 1830 from his seat in Parliament. He and his supporters blamed all of the ills of the United Kingdom on the Act of Union. The Catholic masses had, as usual, suffered the most under Union. They were eager to support anti-Union movements like Repeal and Home Rule. The Irish Catholics had had their consciousness raised by the French and American Revolutions; they knew what majority rule meant, and they wanted it. Home Rule was a way of asserting majority power.

Daniel O'Connell, of course, did not achieve repeal and lived to be pushed aside by the Young Irelanders who lost patience with his tactic of working within the system. The system had failed the majority of the Irish people. When England had its chance to prove to the Irish people that Union was as true an integration of peoples as the Union was with Scotland, it chose laissez-faire capitalism over the needs of the "West Britons" who starved or voted against Union by emigrating during the Great Hunger of the 1840's.

It was in 1921, after another rising and following another threat from the continent, when Ireland at last achieved a 'measure of independence. Union was dead, or was it? In Northeast Ireland, there are still those who long for the days when England and Ireland were one.

(written by John Walsh)

© Irish Cultural Society of the Garden City Area