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IRELAND AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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There is no coincidence in the date that I sat down to write this article. Monday March 17th 2014 – St Patrick’s Day. Two years ago, I was in the middle of New York City to witness first-hand my first St Patrick’s Day in the United States. Perhaps it was my rural upbringing that made the city seem like such an alien place at the best of times; or perhaps it was my reluctance to believe that the presence of a t-shirt and a vague link to Irish identity is any grounds for romantic interaction, but I could just not get into the spirit of things. Being Scottish, it was not as if cultural celebrations of the “old world” in the United States are unusual or surprising to me. New York also has its Tartan Day and it is well-known how dependent Scotland (and Ireland) is on tourism from North America. But I often find St Patrick’s Day quite strange despite Ireland’s long-standing links with America.

Key to the links between Ireland and America are two things: the large numbers of Irish immigrants who found refuge in America, both before and after the American Revolution, and the similar quest for political independence from Great Britain on the part of Americans and Irish alike. The thirteen colonies which became the United States achieved this in 1783 while the southern counties of Ireland did not become a fully independent republic until 1949. But the similarities between the two nations were not lost on a host of commentators in the intervening years. John Mitchel, a nineteenth-century Irish nationalist, commented in 1845 during the Anglo-American dispute over Oregon, that “If there is to be a war between England and the United States, tis impossible for us to pretend sympathy with the former. We shall have allies, not enemies, on the banks of the Columbia.” Similarly, Patrick Ford, the editor of the popular New York-based newspaper *The Irish World* wrote on the centenary of the Revolution that “The Cause of America in 1776 is the cause of Ireland in 1876.” The Friends of Irish Freedom, formed in New York in 1916, claimed 275,000 members at its peak. New York-born Éamon de Valera, a major figure during the Irish War of Independence and the founder of Fianna Fáil, made much of America’s history of colonial resistance as he toured the country in 1919. De Valera spoke to crowds of over 60,000 people in Madison Square Garden and Fenway Park and asked representatives of the Chippewa nation in Wisconsin “to help us win our struggle for freedom.” As late as the 1980s, there was an important (if overemphasized) core of Irish-Americans who supported IRA activities in Northern Ireland. Irish-Americans and the Clinton administration played a crucial role in the 1990s in encouraging both Loyalists and Republicans to sit down to the talks that have transformed Northern Ireland in the past two decades.^[1][\(#_edn1\)](#)

And yet, much as modern St Patrick’s Day often has little to do with Irish heritage, the claim that American and Irish resistance to British colonialism sprung from the same source can be

complicated. The links between Ireland and the American Revolution were much more complex. In addition, as the following will show, the American Revolution had a far greater impact on Ireland than Ireland had on the American Revolution.

That the Irish should have been involved in the



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1778 map of Ireland.

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Revolution should not come as a surprise. As England's "first colony," Ireland was intimately bound up in the politics of the British Empire. While Ireland had its own parliament, the control exerted by that parliament over Irish affairs was limited by Poyning's Law of 1494 (which prevented the parliament in Dublin from initiating legislation) and the Irish Declaratory Act of 1720 (which gave the Westminster parliament the right to legislate for Ireland and was the model of the American act of 1766). Like the American colonies, Ireland was also subject to stunted economic growth as a result of the Navigation Acts.

But resistance to Britain in Ireland was complicated by factors not present in the American colonies. British control was exercised through a group of Anglo-Irish elites. Adherents of the Anglican Church of Ireland, the Anglo-Irish made up around ten per cent of the population

but controlled over ninety per cent of Ireland's land. Their "ascendancy" in Ireland since the seventeenth century was built on the exclusion of both Catholics and dissenting Protestants from power. This tripartite division of Irish society made unified resistance highly problematic. The Anglo-Irish relied on British force to keep them in power but Catholics and the dissenters were more fearful of the Anglo-Irish than they were of metropolitan Britain. Groups like the Catholic Committee, formed in 1756, looked to declare their loyalty to London as a way of challenging the anti-Catholic penal laws. Westminster began to

reciprocate, attempting Catholic relief measures in the early 1760s, 1779, and 1791, but found it difficult to proceed without alienating Anglicans and dissenters alike.^[2]^(#_edn2)

Nor were Irish “Patriots” quite as radical as their colonial brethren. There had long been frustration with the economic restrictions placed upon Ireland but, unlike in 1760s and 1770s America, these did not always morph into demands for political independence. Opposition “Patriots” within the Irish parliament challenged economic dependence and supported the emergence of non-importation and “Buy Irish” societies, but they stopped short of demanding an independent republic. Irish parliamentarians were more interested in restoring lost legislative rights than being granted new ones. In a sense, comparing the Irish and American examples provides some proof of the radicalism of the American Revolution. Irish “Patriots” were willing to challenge British rule but they could only go so far because they were utterly unwilling to share power with the Catholic majority. Their struggle was about their own political rights, not the rights of Irish people in general. The American revolutionaries, while quite capable of excluding most of the population from political influence (women, Native Americans, and African-Americans), were more determined to risk the social order in the pursuit of ostensibly universal natural rights. One Irish MP described the difference between Ireland and America in the following terms: “We are in watercolor what they are in fresco.”^[3]^(#_edn3)

So what then of the claim that the American Revolution can be viewed as an Irish revolution in America? The case has been made that the flood of Irish immigrants into America in the years before the Revolution transformed the character of the conflict and forced other colonists to take more radical positions. The Irish, it is said, “energiz[ed] resistance to the British Empire.”^[4]^(#_edn4) It is true that some 55,000 Protestant Irish arrived in America between 1763 and 1775. Later known as Scots-Irish – a nomenclature that only emerged after the Revolution to distinguish them from poorer post-Revolution Catholic immigrants – these Presbyterians were the descendants of Scottish settlers who had come to Ireland in the seventeenth century to transplant the indigenous Gaelic inhabitants of Ulster. Their support for the American Revolution is widely acknowledged and many British leaders were convinced that they were fighting “little more than an uprising of rabble-rousing Presbyterians.” But their motives for emigrating were complex. Most left Ireland during periodic depressions in the linen trade and acts of parliament permitting duty-free imports of Irish linen into Britain from 1696 and the colonies from 1705 meant that Ulster Scots did not necessarily associate economic hardship with “British oppression” explicitly.^[5]^(#_edn5) Rather than being inherently opposed to Britain, it is far more likely that their dissenting traditions and their experiences as frontier settlers made them broadly suspicious of central authority. Their unwillingness to accept the political authority of urban elites was just as much a problem for American revolutionaries as it was for the British.

Nor is it quite clear that the presence of large numbers of Irishmen in the Patriot armies offers sufficient proof of Irish support for the Revolution. **Nearly half of those who fought in the Continental army or state militias raised in Pennsylvania during the war were of Irish birth or decent.** The presence of Irishmen in the army is not surprising, however, when we consider that newly-arrived immigrants made up a large proportion of recruits. Lists of rebel deserters kept by Sir Henry Clinton suggest that American-born men were a minority in an army that contained many Germans and English as well as Irish. The Irish were also considered to be among those most likely to change sides. Clinton was well aware that many Irishmen had fled to the colonies to avoid prosecution for anti-landlord riots in Ireland. Nevertheless, he was equally sure that these immigrants had not been assimilated into the colonial population and that it would be possible to “work upon these latent Seeds of national attachment” and recruit “Irish” regiments into the Loyalist forces.^{[6](#_edn6)} Irish soldiers were also a significant proportion of the regular British army. In the French & Indian War, Irishmen made up almost one third of the British army in North America. This only increased in the revolutionary period as Britain changed the long-standing rules against enlisting non-Protestants to allow the recruitment of Catholics.^{[7](#_edn7)}

The point here is not that Irish people did not support the revolutionaries; many clearly did. Rather, it is to suggest that being Irish did not imply the presence of revolutionary ideals or an inveterate hatred of Britain. Irish resistance to the British Empire was not transplanted to America – American resistance to Britain was transplanted to Ireland. If we are to really appreciate the importance of the American Revolution, we must remember the effects it had across Europe and the wider world. This began with the pressures placed on Ireland as a result of the war. As noted above, Britain’s need to recruit more and more soldiers led to Catholic relief legislation which alienated the Protestant Ascendancy. Parliamentary leaders who had previously managed the Dublin parliament for the government in London were also alienated by efforts to centralise parliamentary authority. The economic disruptions of the war caused important Irish parliamentarians such as Henry Flood and Henry Grattan (once described as the “Irish Demosthenes”) to question the relationship with Britain.

Patriots such as Flood and Grattan used Britain’s problems in America to wring concessions out of Westminster. Trade restrictions between Ireland and Britain ended in 1780 and the Irish parliament was made independent of Westminster with the repeal of the Declaratory Act and the Constitution of 1782. These major victories for the Irish Patriots inspired further efforts to disentangle Ireland from British authority during the 1780s.^{[8](#_edn8)}

Meanwhile, a new generation of Irishmen were emerging. Inspired by the efforts of the American and French revolutionaries, this new generation was unwilling to accept the leadership of moderate politicians in the Dublin parliament and instead pressed for a democratic republic in Ireland. Known as the “United Irishmen,” they demanded universal

male suffrage, annual parliaments, and the end of all religious restrictions. They found adherents not only among the Catholic population but also among idealistic Protestants, particularly in Dublin and Belfast. The effects of the American Revolution – the spread of revolutionary ideals and the economic disruptions of the war – also led to greater agrarian violence. This violence, in turn, saw the emergence of Protestant and Catholic secret societies which pledged to defend themselves against sectarian violence. Groups such as the Whiteboys and Oakboys fought increasingly violent pitched battles, the most famous of which was the “Battle of the Diamond,” fought in 1795 between the Protestant Peep O’Day Boys and the Catholic Defenders, which left 30 dead.[9](#_edn9)

(<http://allthingsliberty.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/kissmewhig.jpg>)

These tensions led to open rebellion against Britain in 1798. The 1798 rebellion saw the United Irishmen and their Defender allies brutally crushed by the British army and a number of loyalist Irish organisations, most notably the newly-formed Orange Order. The Orange Order emerged from the same population of Ulster Scots who had fought so hard



against Britain in the colonies. In another interesting link, it was Charles Cornwallis, the defeated commander of the British army at Yorktown in 1781, who led crown forces in Ireland in 1798 and presided over a far more brutal policy of counter-insurgency than he employed in America. The failure of the rebellion led to the end of the Irish parliament and the incorporation of Ireland into a full Union with Britain in 1801. It was only in the aftermath of these events that the idea of an affinity between the United States and Ireland became a more realistic proposition. This affinity was increased in the nineteenth century as hundreds of thousands of Catholics fled to America to escape poverty, famine, and oppression in Ireland.



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So the story of Ireland and the American Revolution is more complex than we might first assume. And I can finally put my finger on what I find so strange about St Patrick’s Day. The sea of monotone green t-shirts and the uniform greenness of the Chicago River is a strange

way to celebrate the complexities and entangled histories of Ireland. Then again, it is hard to get those complexities on a t-shirt. "Kiss me, I'm a Whig" anyone?

[1] *The Nation* (6 Dec. 1845); *The Irish World* (22 Jan. 1876); *The Irish World* (25 Oct. 1919); Michael Doorley, *Irish-American Diaspora Nationalism: The Friends of Irish Freedom, 1916-1935* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005), 188; Dave Hannigan, *De Valera in America: The Rebel President and the Making of Irish Independence* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). My sincere thanks go to Dr Niall Whelehan for his recommendations on sources for Irish-American links in the nineteenth century.

[2] For a recent and useful study of eighteenth-century Ireland, see S.J. Connelly, *Divided Kingdom: Ireland, 1630-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[3] Sarah Foster, "Buying Irish: Consumer Nationalism in 18th Century Dublin," *History Today* 47, 6 (Jun. 1997), 15-22; Harry T. Dickinson, "Why did the American Revolution not spread to Ireland?" *Valahian Journal of Historical Studies*, 18-19 (2012-2013), 155-80.

[4] T.H. Breen, "An Irish Revolution in Eighteenth-Century America," *Field Day Review*, 2 (2006), 275-85.

[5] James Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 305; for the most effective examination of the Scots-Irish, see Patrick Griffin, *The People with No Name: Ireland's Ulster Scots and America's Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic World, 1689-1764* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[6] *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815*, eds. Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling and David N. Doyle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War: a Social History of the Continental Army* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 27-43; William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Henry Clinton papers, vol. 86, f. 5, Monthly return of deserters, 21 Feb. 1780; vol. 44, f. 7, Clinton to Germain, 23 Oct. 1778.

[7] Stephen Brumwell, *Redcoats: The British Soldier and War in the Americas, 1755-1763* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 318; R.K. Donovan, "The Military Origins of the Roman Catholic Relief Programme of 1778," *Historical Journal* 28, 1 (1985), 79-102.

[8] Vincent Morely, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution, 1760-1783* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[9] David W. Miller, "Politicisation in Revolutionary Ireland: The Case of the Armagh Troubles," *Irish Economic and Social History* 23, 1 (1996), 100-123.

