

Northern Ireland

A Short History

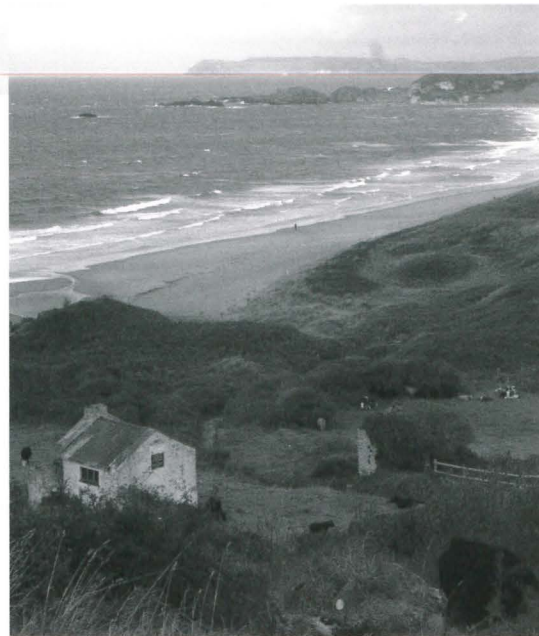
Jonathan Bardon

Human beings are relatively new inhabitants of Ireland. The oldest evidence of them, near Coleraine, dates to around 7,200 B.C.E. Celtic-speaking Gaels, skilled with horses and iron weapons, controlled the island by the beginning of the Christian era.

Ireland escaped Roman conquest and invasion by Germanic tribes. Not until the end of the eighth century did Ireland attract the attention of aggressive outsiders, the Vikings.

A century after they overwhelmed England, the Normans came to Ireland. They quickly overran much of the south and west, yet Norman hold of Ulster's coastlands remained precarious. By the late fifteenth century, all Ulster, save the castle of Carrickfergus, had fallen outside the English Crown's control.

The sixteenth century witnessed seismic change. England became a powerful, centralized state under Tudor monarchs. It also became Protestant, so its rulers could not afford to allow Catholic powers—Spain in particular—to threaten the realm from the west by making common cause with disaffected Irish. In the reign of Elizabeth, the Gaelic lords of Ulster, commanded by Hugh O'Neill, the Earl of Tyrone, led Ireland's ferocious resistance. After a succession of humiliating reverses, the English finally succeeded in crushing the people of Ulster only by slaughtering their cattle and laying waste their cornfields. When O'Neill surrendered in the spring of 1603, Ulster was swept by a terrible man-made famine. Bitter religious division in Europe made Ireland's defeat all the worse. The English



Archaeologists believe the earliest Irish settlements were established along the north Antrim coast. Photo by Nancy Groce, Smithsonian Institution

conquerors left a dreadful legacy of resentment and suspicion to reverberate down the centuries.

The Gaelic nobles of Ulster found it impossible to adjust to the new regime. In September 1607, they sailed away from Lough Swilly in north Donegal, never to return. King James I, the first ruler of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, seized the opportunity in 1609 to embark on the most ambitious scheme of colonization ever undertaken in Western Europe—the Plantation of Ulster. The King's British subjects—provided they were Protestants—were invited to colonize vast tracts of confiscated land in six counties. And come they did, eventually in the tens of thousands.

Built in 1177 by the Normans, Carrickfergus Castle has played a pivotal role in Ireland's history for centuries. Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Bureau



This grandiose project, however, was only partially successful. Colonists had been told that the natives had been largely wiped out by war and famine, but during the first decades of the Plantation, they found themselves everywhere outnumbered by them. The conquered Irish in turn faced an influx of planters, speaking an alien tongue, professing a religion they regarded as heretical, abiding by laws that were unfamiliar to them, and intent on dispossessing them. Political instability in England ensured that blood would flow for the rest of the seventeenth century. As Parliament prepared to wage war on Charles I, the Ulster Irish massacred thousands of British settlers in 1641. Scottish troops and the forces of Parliament then exacted fearsome revenge. The ascendancy of a Catholic King, James II, in 1685, once again precipitated full-scale war in Ireland.

For a brief period, Ireland became the cockpit of Europe. Driven out of England by his nobles and William of Orange (ruler of Holland), James came to Ireland with a large professional army. The epic resistance of the colonists, who took refuge in the walled city of Londonderry, gave William time to bring a great multinational army to Ulster. William routed James near Drogheda by the Boyne River on July 1, 1690, and his army finally triumphed at Aughrim in the far west on July 12, 1691.

William's victories, celebrated by northern Protestants every year thereafter, were so complete that Ireland enjoyed a century of peace. Penal legislation deprived Catholics of political rights, access to public office, and employment in the legal profession. A law that prevented Catholics from buying land ensured

that by 1780 Protestants (who formed approximately one quarter of the population) owned 95 percent of the land. Nevertheless, the island prospered, benefiting as it did indirectly from the expansion of colonial trade. The population rose from about two million in 1700 to over five million in 1800.

Ulster had been Ireland's poorest province. Now it flourished as never before, largely due to the development of the linen trade. Fearful of Irish competition, the Westminster parliament legislated to restrict exports of Irish wool and cattle. By contrast, linen was given official encouragement. Manufacture of linen in Ulster was at first essentially a domestic industry carried on, for the most part, by people who divided their time between farming and making yarn and cloth. The heart of the industry was the "linen triangle," which extended from Dungannon in the center of Ulster, east to Lisburn, and south to Armagh; then, as output increased, Newry was drawn in. During the second half of the eighteenth century, drapers bought cloth unbleached, thus giving weavers a quicker return for their work. In effect, these linen merchants became Ulster's first capitalists by investing their profits in bleach greens, where, with the aid of water power, they finished the cloth to the high standard required by the English market. The drapers, in short, made sure that Ulster had an important and early role to play in Europe's first industrial revolution.

In spite of the robust economy, many Presbyterians in Ulster grew restless and sought a better life across the Atlantic. Immigration to America commenced when Protestant Scots had almost ceased immigrating





to Ulster. Irish Catholics had neither the resources nor the inclination to go to British colonies that were still overwhelmingly Protestant.

"The good Bargains of yar lands in that country doe greatly encourage me to pluck up my spirits and make redie for the journey, for we are now oppressed with our lands at 8s. an acre," David Lindsay explained to his Pennsylvanian cousins in 1758. By 1770, emigration from Ulster was reaching about ten thousand a year. Already accustomed to being on the move and clearing and defending their land, these "Scotch-Irish" were drawn to the "back country," there to push forward European settlement by frontier skirmishing with Pontiac and other Native Americans.

As the eighteenth century progressed, the Enlightenment made inroads in Ireland. Most of the Penal Laws were repealed, although Catholics still could not become members of Parliament. Inspired first by the American Revolution and then by the French Revolution, some Presbyterians in eastern Ulster campaigned for a representative Irish parliament (which in effect represented only the Episcopalian aristocracy and gentry). Some, calling themselves the United Irishmen, made common cause with the oppressed Catholic peasantry and prepared to fight with French help for an independent republic. Protestants in central and western Ulster, in contrast, formed the Orange Order in 1795 to defend Protestant rights.

The Giant's Causeway, a geological phenomenon on the north Antrim coast, is comprised of thousands of hexagonal stone columns. A focal point for myths and legends since pre-historic times, it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board

The historic walled city of Londonderry, also called Derry. Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board

When rebellion came in 1798, it began the bloodiest episode in modern Irish history—more than 30,000 met with violent deaths before the year was over.

The Westminster government responded to the insurrection in Ireland by deciding that the island must be ruled directly from London. The privileged, unrepresentative Irish parliament was cajoled and bribed into voting itself out of existence, and in January 1801, the Act of Union came into force. Now Ireland became an integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The viceroy, Lord Cornwallis, observed that the mass of the Irish people did not "care one farthing" about the Union, for or against. He was probably right. But the "Protestant Ascendancy," the nobility, hated losing their exclusive parliament, and many Orange lodges—fearing that the Union would bring with it "Catholic Emancipation" (the right of Catholics to attend Parliament)—petitioned against it.

The ensuing decades witnessed a radical change in opinion. The Union became a burning issue with profound consequences for Ulster, and it remains the single most important issue in Northern Irish elections to this day. Protestants found that the sky did not fall in after the Union: they retained privileged control of public services, elections, the legal profession, and local government. Catholics, generally in favor of the Union at first, turned against it because it did not allow them to attend Parliament. Emancipation had to be wrested from a reluctant Westminster government in 1829. Then, as nationalism spread, the demand for restoration of a Dublin parliament grew stronger. Daniel O'Connell led the movement in the 1830s and 1840s.

Irish politics became polarized along religious lines. Almost all Catholics of every class sought some form of Irish independence. The economy over most of the island had not fared well under the Union, and when potato blight struck in the 1840s, a million people died of hunger and disease, and over a million others immigrated, mostly to America. Apart from some high-profile men such as John Mitchel, Isaac Butt, and Charles Stewart Parnell, the great majority of Irish Protestants now closed ranks in support of the Union because they feared Catholics would dominate an Irish parliament. In the Northeast, where Protestants formed a comfortable majority, the Union had already been a striking success.

Belfast in the nineteenth century became the fastest-growing urban center in the United Kingdom. Its population, merely 19,000 in 1801, had reached 350,000 a hundred years later. Belfast's industrial revolution began with the production of cotton yarn by power-driven machinery. Then, in the 1830s, entrepreneurs adapted their machinery to the steam-driven manufacture of linen. During the American Civil War, when Lancashire was starved of supplies of raw cotton, Ulster's linen

industry experienced an unparalleled boom. Belfast became—and remained for some time—the world center of linen production. The president of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce, H. O. Lanyon, made this estimation in 1895:

I find the length of yarn produced in the year amounts to about 644,000,000 miles, making a thread which would encircle the world 25,000 miles. If it could be used for a telephone wire it would give us six lines to the sun, and about 380 besides to the moon. The exports of linen in 1894 measured about 156,000,000 yards, which would make a girdle for the earth at the Equator three yards wide, or cover an area of 32,000 acres, or it would reach from end to end of the County of Down, one mile wide.

An engineering industry emerged to provide flax machinery. The deepening of the sea channel to Belfast docks led directly to the opening of the most remarkable chapter in Ulster's economic story. Shipbuilding began on an artificial island created from waste mud in Belfast Lough in the 1850s. Under the dynamic management



of Edward Harland, iron and later steel vessels were constructed in a revolutionary manner. During the American Civil War, the Confederates purchased some of these ships in order to outrun the Northern states' blockade. Then, in partnership with Gustav Wolff, Harland supplied one of the world's largest shipping firms, the White Star Line of Liverpool, with all its transatlantic passenger liners.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Belfast's shipyard built the biggest ships in the world. Belfast became Ireland's largest city and the port of third importance in the United Kingdom. The city also had the biggest linen mill, dry dock, tobacco factory, rope works, flax-machinery factory, spiral-guided gasometer, aerated-waters factory, fan-making, tea machinery works, handkerchief factory, and colored Christmas card-printing works in the world.

The people, however, were more sharply divided than before on Ireland's political future. When the British government decided in 1912 to give the island "Home Rule" (a devolved government in Dublin), Ulster Protestants pledged themselves to use "all means which may be found" to prevent it. By the summer of 1914, as rival paramilitary armies paraded the streets, the country seemed headed for civil war.

Civil war was postponed by the outbreak of the First World War. Catholics and Protestants in almost equal numbers enlisted voluntarily to fight in the trenches against the German Empire and its allies. A small minority of Republicans preferred to use the war to fight for independence. Their uprising during Easter week of 1916 was crushed in less than a week, but seeing that there was still no parliament in Dublin, Irish nationalists became disillusioned and sought complete independence.

The British government, eager to extract itself from the Irish imbroglio, decided in 1920 to partition Ireland into Northern Ireland, composed of the six northeastern counties, with a devolved parliament in Belfast, and Southern Ireland, made up of the remaining twenty-six counties, with a Home Rule parliament. That solution was quickly rejected by nationalists: they fought on and won independence (within the British Empire) in December 1921. Northern Ireland, despite ferocious intercommunal warfare between 1920 and 1922, survived intact as part of the United Kingdom. The British government's arrangement for Northern Ireland suited the Protestant majority very well.

Although peace returned in 1923, the economy continued to suffer. The First World War dramatically altered global trading conditions. Other countries, such as the United States, Japan, and Germany, were able to build ships more cheaply and rapidly than Belfast. Linen faced a rising challenge from cheaper cotton, changing fashion, and the first synthetic fibers. Around one fifth of the male workforce was unemployed in the 1920s, and following the 1929 Wall Street Crash, more than one quarter was out of work.



(Left) Belfast grew from a small port village into a major manufacturing center during the nineteenth century. Courtesy Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

(Right) The Mourne Mountains in County Down. Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board

When world war came again in 1939, the efforts of Belfast's aging Unionist government to protect citizens proved woefully inadequate. The city suffered severely from German air attack during the spring of 1941: more citizens lost their lives in one night's raid on Belfast than any other city in the United Kingdom save London. Thereafter, Northern Ireland became an arsenal of victory as the shipyard, engineering works, and textile factories strove to meet the insatiable Allied war demand. While Northern Ireland played a crucial role during the Battle of the Atlantic, the twenty-six southern counties, known as Éire since 1937, remained neutral. The United States used Northern Ireland as its base in preparation for the North African and Normandy landings. The American servicemen (at one stage, they formed one tenth of the population of the six counties) received a warm welcome from all sections of the community.

During the peaceful, uneventful years after the war, all was not well in Northern Ireland. The Westminster government in effect had taken its eye off the ball since 1923. Blatant unfairness in local government elections, public and private appointments, and allocation of local authority housing did much to keep alive the resentment of the Catholic minority (around one third of the region's inhabitants). The civil rights movement in the United States, protests against the Vietnam War, and riots in Paris encouraged the growth of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement. Direct action on the streets dissolved into outright intercommunal warfare in the summer of 1969, and in 1972, Westminster decided to rule the region directly from London.

Governments and oppositions alike at Westminster agreed that the long-term solution was a new devolved assembly and government in which Protestants and Catholics would share power. But the violence raged on, making Northern Ireland's conflict the longest-running in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Both Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries called

ceasefires during the fall of 1994. Although they were violated on many occasions, conflict did not return on the previous scale.

Warmly supported by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, and American President Bill Clinton, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 gave cross-community backing to power sharing. The agreement faltered on several occasions, but no one doubted that Northern Ireland had turned a corner. In spite of surviving suspicion, which sometimes flared into vicious sectarian strife, the region entered the new millennium with a level of peace that would be the envy of many large American cities. Peace brought in its wake fresh investment, impressive reconstruction, and the near disappearance of mass unemployment, which had blighted life for many decades.

Born and educated in Dublin, Jonathan Bardon has been teaching in Belfast since 1964, most recently in Queen's University Belfast. His books on Irish history include A History of Ulster, Belfast: An Illustrated History, and Dublin: One Thousand Years of Wood Quay. He scripted A Short History of Ireland, 240 five-minute documentaries, which BBC Radio Ulster is currently broadcasting.

At the foot of the Queen's Bridge, "The Angel of Thanksgiving and Reconciliation," a fifteen-meter high sculpture by Andy Scott, welcomes visitors to Belfast.
Photo courtesy Northern Ireland Tourist Board

