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The Rebellion of 1798 and the Union

The Rebellion and its Suppression

The leaders of this rebellion were Protestants. The Catholic gentry and priesthood recoiled from any contact with French atheists and Jacobins: they were without republican sympathies; but could not fail to deplore the sufferings and oppression of the wretched peasantry who professed their faith. The Protestant party, however,—frantic with fear, bigotry, and party spirit,—denounced the whole Catholic body as rebels and public enemies. The hideous scenes of this rebellion are only to be paralleled by the enormities of the French Revolution. The rebels were unloosed savages,—mad with hatred and revenge, burning, destroying and slaying: the loyalists and military were ferocious and cruel beyond belief. [326] Not only were armed peasants hunted down like wild beasts: but the disturbed districts were abandoned to the license of a brutal soldiery. The wretched 'croppies' were scourged, pitch-capped, picketed, half-hung, tortured, mutilated, and shot: their homes rifled and burned: their wives and daughters violated with revolting barbarity.(1) Before the outbreak of the rebellion, the soldiers had been utterly demoralised by license and cruelty, unchecked by the civil power.(2) Sir Ralph Abercromby, in a general order, had declared 'the army to be in a state of licentiousness, which must render it formidable to every one but the enemy.' In vain had that humane and enlightened soldier attempted to restrain military excesses. Thwarted by the weakness of Lord Camden, and the bigotry and fierce party zeal of his cabinet, he retired in disgust from the command of an army, which had been degraded into bands of ruffians and bandits. The troops, hounded on to renewed license, were fit instruments of the infuriated vengeance of the ruling faction.

In the midst of these frightful scenes, Lord Cornwallis assumed the civil and military government of Ireland. Temperate, sensible, and humane, he was horrified not less by the [327] atrocities of the rebels, than by the revolting cruelty and lawlessness of the troops, and the vindictive passions of all concerned in the administration of affairs.(3) Moderation and humanity were to be found in none but English regiments.(4) With native officers, rapine and murder were no crimes.(5)

Union Proposed

The rebellion was crushed: but how was a country so convulsed with evil passions to be governed? Lord Cornwallis found his council, or junto, at the Castle, by whom it had long been ruled, 'blinded by their passions and prejudices.' Persuaded that the policy of this party had aggravated the political evils of their wretched country, he endeavoured to save the Irish from [328]themselves, by that scheme of union which a greater statesman than himself had long since conceived. Under the old system of government, concessions, conciliation, and justice were impracticable. The only hope of toleration and equity was to be found in the mild and impartial rule of British statesmen, and an united Parliament. In this spirit was the union sought by Mr. Pitt, who 'resented and spurned the bigoted fury of Irish Protestants:' in this spirit was it promoted by Lord Cornwallis. Self-government had become impossible. 'If ever there was a country,' said Lord Hutchinson, 'unfit to govern itself, it is Ireland; a corrupt aristocracy, a ferocious commonalty, a distracted government, a divided people.' Imperial considerations, no less paramount, also pointed to the union. Not only had the divisions of the Irish people rendered the difficulties of internal administration insuperable: but they had

proved a source of weakness and danger from without. Ireland could no longer be suffered to continue a separate realm: but must be fused and welded into one state, with Great Britain.

But the difficulties of this great scheme were not easily to be overcome. However desirable, and even necessary, for the interests of Ireland herself, an invitation to surrender her independence,—so recently acquired,—deeply affected her national sensibilities. To be merged [329] in the greater and more powerful kingdom, was to lose her distinct nationality. And how could she be assured against neglect and oppression, when wholly at the mercy of the Parliament of Great Britain, whose sovereignty she had lately renounced? The liberties she had won in 1782, were all to be forfeited and abandoned. At any other time, these national feelings alone would have made an union impossible. But the country, desolated by a war of classes and religions, had not yet recovered the united sentiments of a nation.

But other difficulties, no less formidable, were to be encountered. The Irish party were invited to yield up the power and patronage of the Castle: the peers to surrender their proud position as hereditary councillors, in Parliament: the great families to abandon their boroughs. The compact confederacy of interests and corruption was to be broken up.(6) But the government, convinced of the necessity of the Union, was prepared to overcome every obstacle.

Means by which Accomplished

The Parliament of Great Britain recognised the [330]Union as a necessary measure of state policy; and the masterly arguments of Mr. Pitt admitted of little resistance.(7) But the first proposal to the Irish Parliament miscarried; an amendment in favour of maintaining an independent legislature being lost by a single vote.(8) It was plain that corrupt interests could only be overcome by corruption. Nomination boroughs must be bought, and their members indemnified,—county interests conciliated,—officers and expectant lawyers compensated,—opponents bribed. Lord Castlereagh estimated the cost of these expedients at a million and a half; and the price was forthcoming.(9) The purchase of boroughs was no new scheme, having been proposed by Mr. Pitt himself, as the basis of his measure of Parliamentary reform in 1785;(10) and now it was systematically carried out in Ireland. The patrons of boroughs received £7,500 for each seat; and eighty-four boroughs were disfranchised.(11) Lord [331] Downshire was paid £52,500 for seven seats; Lord Ely, £45,000 for six. The total compensation amounted to £1,260,000. Peers were further compensated for the loss of their privileges in the national council, by profuse promises of English peerages, or promotion in the peerage of Ireland: commoners were conciliated by new honours,(12) and by the largesses of the British government. Places were given or promised,—pensions multiplied,—secret-service money exhausted. In vain Lord Cornwallis complained of the 'political jobbing' and 'dirty business' in which he was 'involved beyond all bearing,' and 'longed to kick those whom his public duty obliged him to court.' In vain he 'despised and hated himself,' while 'negotiating and jobbing with the most corrupt people under heaven.'(13) British gold was sent for and [332] distributed; and, at length,—in defiance of threats of armed resistance,—in spite of insidious promises of relief to Catholics,(14)—and corrupt defection among the supporters of government,(15)—the cause was won. A great end was compassed by means the most base and shameless. Grattan, Lord Charlemont, Ponsonby, Plunket, and a few patriots continued to protest against the sale of the liberties and free constitution of Ireland. Their eloquence and public virtue command the respect of posterity: but the wretched history of their country denies them its sympathy.

Terms of the Union

The terms of the Union were now speedily adjusted and ratified by the Parliaments of both countries.(16) Ireland was to be represented, in the Parliament of the United Kingdom, by four spiritual lords, sitting by rotation of sessions; by twenty-eight temporal peers, elected for life by the Irish peerage; and by a hundred members of the House of Commons. Her commerce

was at [333] length admitted to a freedom which, under other conditions, could not have been attained.

Such was the incorporation of the two countries: and henceforth the history of Ireland became the history of England. Had Mr. Pitt's liberal and enlightened policy been carried out, the Catholics of Ireland would have been at once admitted to a participation in the privileges of the constitution: provision would have been made for their clergy; and the grievances of the tithe system would have been redressed. But we have seen how his statesmanship was overborne by the scruples of the king;(17) and how long and arduous was the struggle by which religious liberty was won. The Irish were denied those rights which English statesmen had designed for them. Nor was this the worst evil which followed the fall of Mr. Pitt, and the reversal of his policy. So long as narrow Tory principles prevailed in the councils of England, the government of Ireland was confided to the kindred party at the Castle. Protestant ascendancy was maintained as rigorously as ever: Catholics were governed by Orangemen: the close oligarchy which had ruled Ireland before the Union was still absolute. Repression and coercion continued to be the principles of its harsh domination.(18) The [334] representation of Ireland, in the United Parliament, continued in the hands of the same party, who supported Tory ministers, and encouraged them to resist every concession which more liberal statesmen proposed. Political liberties and equality were withheld; yet the superior moderation and enlightenment of British statesmen secured a more equitable administration of the laws, and much remedial legislation, designed for the improvement of the social and material condition of the people. These men earnestly strove to govern Ireland well, within the range of their narrow principles. The few restrictions which the Union had still left upon her commerce were removed;(19) her laws were reviewed, and their administration amended; her taxation was lightened; the education of her people encouraged; her prosperity stimulated by public works. Despite of insufficient capital and social disturbance, her trade, shipping, and manufactures expanded with her freedom.

Irish Liberties Secured

At length, after thirty years, the people of Ireland [335] were admitted to the rights of citizens. The Catholic Relief Act was speedily followed by an amendment of the representation; and from that time, the spirit of freedom and equality has animated the administration of Irish affairs. The party of Protestant ascendancy was finally overthrown; and rulers pledged to a more liberal policy, guided the councils of the state. Ireland shared with England every extension of popular rights. The full development of her liberties, however, was retarded by the factious violence of parties,—by the divisions of Orangemen and repealers,—by old religious hatreds,—by social feuds and agrarian outrages; and by the wretchedness of a population constantly in excess of the means of employment. The frightful visitation of famine in 1846, succeeded by an unparalleled emigration, swept from the Irish soil more than a fourth of its people.(20) Their sufferings were generously relieved by England; and, grievous as they were, the hand of God wrought greater blessings for the survivors, than any legislation of man could have accomplished.

In the midst of all discouragements,—in spite of clamours and misrepresentation,—in defiance of hostile factions,—the executive and the legislature have nobly striven to effect the political and social regeneration of Ireland. The great English parties have honourably vied with one [336] another, in carrying out this policy. Remedial legislation for Ireland, and the administration of her affairs, have, at some periods, engrossed more attention than the whole British Empire. Ancient feuds have yet to be extinguished, and religious divisions healed: but nothing has been wanting that the wisdom and beneficence of the state could devise for insuring freedom, equal justice, and the privileges of the constitution, to every class of the Irish people. Good laws have been well administered: franchises have been recognised as rights, not admitted as pretences. Equality has been not a legal theory, but an unquestioned

fact. We have seen how Catholics were excluded from all the rights of citizens. What is now their position? In 1860, of the twelve judges on the Irish bench, eight were Catholics.(21) In the southern counties of Ireland, Catholic gentlemen have been selected, in preference to Protestants, to serve the office of sheriff, in order to insure confidence in the administration of justice. England has also freely opened to the sons of Ireland the glittering ambition of arms, of statesmanship, of diplomacy, of forensic honour. The names of Wellington, Castlereagh, and Palmerston attest that the highest places in the state may be won by Irish genius.

The number of distinguished Irishmen who have been added to the roll of British peers, proves with what welcome the incorporation of the sister kingdom has been accepted. Nor have other dignities [337] been less freely dispensed to the honourable ambition of their countrymen. One illustration will suffice. In 1860, of the fifteen judges on the English bench, no less than four were Irishmen.(22) Freedom, equality, and honour have been the fruits of the Union; and Ireland has exchanged an enslaved nationality, for a glorious incorporation with the first empire of the world.

Footnotes.

1. Plowden's Hist., ii. 701, 705 and note, 712-714. It was a favourite sport to fasten caps filled with hot pitch on to the heads of the peasants, or to make them stand upon a sharp stake or picket.—Ibid., 713; Moore's Life of Lord E. Fitzgerald, ii 74, 203.
2. The military had been enjoined by proclamation to act without being called upon by the civil magistrates.—Plowden's Hist., ii.622, App. civ. cv.; Lord Dunfermline's Memoir of Sir Ralph Abercromby, 69.
3. Writing June 28th, 1798, he said: 'I am much afraid that any man in a brown coat, who is found within several miles of the field of action, is butchered without discrimination.'—'It shall be one of my first objects to soften the ferocity of our troops, which I am afraid, in the Irish corps at least, is not confined to the private soldiers.'—Cornwallis Corr. ii. 355. Of the militia he said: 'They are ferocious and cruel in the extreme, when any poor wretches, either with or without arms, come within their power: in short, murder appears to be their favourite pastime.'—Ibid., 358. 'The principal persons of this country, and the members of both Houses of Parliament, are, in general, averse to all acts of clemency and would pursue measures that could only terminate in the extirpation of the greater number of the inhabitants, and in the utter destruction of the country.'—Ibid., 358. Again, he deplores 'the numberless murders that, are hourly committed by our people without any process or examination whatever.' 'The conversation of the principal persons of the country tends to encourage this system of blood; and the conversation, even at my table, where you may well suppose I do all I can to prevent it, always turns on hanging, shooting, burning, etc. etc.; and if a priest has been put to death, the greatest joy is expressed by the whole company.'—Ibid., 369.
4. In sending the 100th Regiment and 'some troops that can be depended upon,' he wrote: 'The shocking barbarities of our national troops would be more likely to provoke rebellion than to suppress it.'—Ibid., 377. See also his General Order, Aug. 31st, 1798.—Ibid., 395.
5. E.g. the murder of Dogherty.—Ibid., 420. See also Lord Holland's Mem., i. 105-114.
6. 'There are two classes of men in Parliament, whom the disasters and sufferings of the country have but very imperfectly awakened to the necessity of a change, viz. the borough proprietors, and the immediate agents of government,'—Lord Cornwallis to Duke of Portland, Jan. 5th, 1799; Corr., iii. 31. Again: 'There certainly is a very strong disinclination to the measure in many of the borough proprietors, and a not less marked repugnance in many of the official people, particularly in those who have been longest in the habits of the current system.'—Same to same, Jan. 11th, 1799; Ibid., 34. And much later in the struggle, his lordship wrote: 'The nearer the great event

approaches, the more are the needy and interested senators alarmed at the effects it may possibly have on their interests, and the provision for their families; and I believe that half of our majority would be at least as much delighted as any of our opponents, if the measure could be defeated.'—*Ibid.*, 228.

7. In the Commons, his resolutions were carried by 149 votes against 24, and in the Lords without a division.—*Plowden's Hist.*, ii. 896.
8. Jan. 22nd, 1799. Ayes, 106; Noes, 106.—*Cornwallis Corr.*, iii. 40-61.
9. *Castlereagh Corr.*, ii. 161. His lordship divided the cost as follows:—Boroughs, £756,000; county interests, £224,000; barristers, £200,000; purchasers of seats, £75,000; Dublin, £200,000: total, £1,433,000.—*Cornwallis Corr.*, iii. 81; *Stanhope's Life of Pitt*, iii. 180. Lord Cornwallis wrote, July 1st, 1799: 'There cannot be a stronger argument for the measure than the overgrown Parliamentary power of five or six of our pampered borough-mongers, who are become most formidable to government, by their long possession of the entire patronage of the crown, in their respective districts.' *Corr.*, iii. 110.
10. *Supra*, Vol. I., 400.
11. Of the 34 boroughs retained, nine only were open.—*Cornwallis Corr.*, iii. 234, 324. See list of boroughs disfranchised and sums paid to proprietors.—*Ibid.*, 321-324. The Ponsonbys exercised influence over 22 seats; Lord Downshire and the Beresfords, respectively, over nearly as many. 23 of the 34 boroughs remained close until the Reform Act of 1832.—*Ibid.*, 324. Many of the counties also continued in the hands of the great families.—*Ibid.*; and see *supra*, Vol. I. 360.
12. *Castlereagh Corr.*, iii. 330; *Cornwallis Corr.*, iii. 244, 252, 257, 262. 29 Irish peerages were created, of which seven were unconnected with the Union; 20 Irish peers were promoted, and 6 English peerages granted for Irish services.—*Ibid.*, 318. See also *Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt*, iii. 180.
13. *Cornwallis Corr.*, iii. 102. The luckless viceroy applied to himself the appropriate lines of Swift:

'So to effect his monarch's ends,
From hell a viceroy devil ascends:
His budget with corruption cramm'd—
The contributions of the damn'd—
Which with unsparing hand he strows
Through courts and senates, as he goes;
And then, at Beelzebub's black hall,
Complains his budget is too small.'

14. See *supra*, p. 116.
15. 'Sir R Butler, Mahon, and Fetherstone were taken off by county cabals during the recess, and Whaley absolutely bought by the Opposition stock purse. He received, I understand, £3,000 down, and is to receive as much more after the service is performed. We have undoubted proofs, though not such as we can disclose, that they are enabled to offer as high as £6,000 for an individual vote, and I lament to state that there are individuals remaining amongst us that are likely to yield to this temptation.'—Lord Castlereagh to Duke of Portland, Feb. 7th, 1800; *Cornwallis Corr.*, iii. 182. 'The enemy, to my certain knowledge, offer £5,000 ready money for a vote.'—Lord Cornwallis to Bishop of Lichfield; *Ibid.*, 184.
16. Acts of Union 1800; 39 and 40 Geo. III. c. 67 and 40 Geo. III. c. 38. (Ireland.)
17. *Vol. I. 92*; and *supra*, p. 118.
18. Lord Cornwallis had foreseen this evil. He wrote, May 1st, 1800: 'If a successor were to be appointed who should, as almost all former lords-lieutenants have done, throw himself into the hands of this party, no advantage would be derived from the Union.'—

Corr., iii. 237. Again, Dec. 1st, 1800: 'They assert that the Catholics of Ireland (seven-tenths of the population of the country) never can be good subjects to a Protestant government. What then have we done, if this position be true? We have united ourselves to a people whom we ought, in policy, to have destroyed.'—*Ibid.*, 307. Again, Feb. 15th, 1801: 'No consideration could induce me to take a responsible part with any administration who can be so blind to the interest, and indeed to the immediate security, of their country, as to persevere in the old system of proscription and exclusion in Ireland.'—*Ibid.*, 337.

19. Corn trade, 46 Geo. III. c. 97; Countervailing Duties, 4 Geo. IV. c. 72; Butter trade, 8 Geo. IV c. 61; 9 Geo. IV. c. 88.
20. In the ten years, from 1841 to 1851, it had decreased from 8,175,124 to 6,552,385, or 19.85 per cent. The total loss, however, was computed at 2,466,414. The decrease amounted to 49 persons to every square mile.—Census Report, 1851.
21. Sir Michael O'Loughlen was the first Catholic promoted to the bench, as Master of the Rolls.—Grattan's Life, i. 66.
22. Viz., Mr. Justice Willes, Mr. Justice Keating, Mr. Justice Hill, and Baron Martin; to whom has since been added Mr. Justice Shee, an Irishman and a Catholic.

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