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The Irish Reformation

Europe in the fifteenth century is in the middle of a religious Reformation. Religious figures, such as Martin Luther, rejected the Catholic church because they believed the church had become corrupt and self-serving. In England, the Reformation is also underway after King Henry VIII, who broke from the Pope and the Catholic church to divorce Katherine of Aragon, and introduced the Protestant faith. The Catholic Church and the Papacy play important roles in Pre-Reformation Ireland. The Papacy is at the center of the Irish Pre-Reformation Church. The Pope has the right to the major benefit of overriding smaller patrons. Papal patronage remains essential and controversial in Ireland, unlike most European countries with strong monarchies which already Reformed the Church.¹ However, in the English Church, the Gaelic clergy is barred from any benefits without permission from English law. English monarchies introduce the Reformation movement to Ireland. This movement develops gradually because the Tudor's overturn each other's policies, the Jesuits continue the Catholic crusade, and the Irish lack a vernacular Bible in the Gaelic language.

Medieval Ireland was under Gaelic rule with independent lordships, and its people shared a common language, law, culture, and Catholic religion. The Reformation ended medieval Ireland and Gaelic rule and in 1603 the Irish came under English rule. During the Reformation,

¹Steven G. Ellis, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors, 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule*, Longman, 1998, 191

five different British monarchs, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Queen Mary I, and Queen Elizabeth I had different influences on the Irish Reformation. The Reformation has little impact on the Gaelic Irish because at the time they were more concerned with keeping their traditional rights and landholdings and are less concerned about theology. However, the Reformation does influence the Old English community. The Old English consider themselves different from their Irish neighbors because they descend from the English of the Pale.

The diocese of Dublin becomes the most important diocese in Ireland because of the sophistication of its institutional fabric, financial resources, and the superior wealth, in particular the bishop benefit. Since the diocese are financially stable the British government knew the diocese could not enforce their religion in Gaelic Ireland without some type of political conquest.

² The Tudor reign, from 1489-1609, was part of that political and religious conquest.

The beginning of the Tudor reign began when King Henry VIII was crowned king of England in 1509. Two events lead to the beginning of the Irish Reformation starting in 1534. The first began in the diocese of Dublin who provoked the Kildare rebellion. In this incident, the Fitzgerald dynasty had the desire to force the abandonment of the political and administrative reforms of Thomas Cromwell, King Henry's chief minister.³ The second event occurred two years later, in 1536, when King Henry wanted to increase his control of the Irish colonies. However, Henry is prevented by the many issues that exist in Tudor England were pushed onto: Ireland, constitutionalism, the strained relationship between the crown and local government, and the problem of religious conformity.⁴ To overcome these issues, Henry VIII is declared by the

² James A. Murray, *Enforcing the English Reformation in Ireland Clerical Resistance and Political Conflict in the Diocese of Dublin, 1534-1590*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 20.

³ Ibid, 82.

⁴ Samantha A. Meigs, *The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism, 1400-1690*, St. Martin's Press, 1997, 57.

Irish Parliament ‘the only supreme head in earth of the whole church of Ireland.’⁵ But after the legislation in 1536 was passed, Gaelic chroniclers at first perceived the Reformation as a temporary local disturbance.⁶ Two different Annals, *the Annals of Ulster* and *the Annals of Connaught* discuss that in 1540 that “the English Justiciar that was in Ireland went to England at the summons of the King of England, having well-nigh destroyed the Orders, Clergy, and miraculous relics of all Ireland.”⁷ King Henry did move Ireland in the direction of the Protestant church but did not enforce the religion to the point local Irish did not notice a difference.

After the death of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI came into power from 1547-1553, bringing the Edwardian Reformation. The English Reformers arrived in Ireland expecting the support of the Old English community. However, the Old English communities were not culturally interchangeable with the English communities since these communities have been surrounded by the Gaelic Irish communities. In 1550, the Reformation began to strictly enforce the First Act of Uniformity, forcing the adoption of the Book of Prayer from the traditional Latin services. King Henry also enforced the imminent suppression of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, the National Cathedral of the Church of Ireland, in Dublin in 1547.⁸ Enforcement of this act did build the Protestant faith or convert the Irish.⁹ By the time of Queen Mary I’s reign Protestantism has not gained support and Catholicism was still very strong in Ireland.

Queen Mary is a Catholic supporter rather than a Protestant and ruled from 1553-1558. Because Queen Mary is of Catholic faith, the Marian government moves to restore Catholicism

⁵ Alan Ford, *The Protestant Reformation in Ireland, 1590-1641*, 2nd ed., Four Courts Press, 1997, 23. 3 vols (Dublin), i, 90; 28 Henry VIII, c.2.

⁶ Ibid, 58.

⁷ Ibid, 59.

⁸ James A. Murray, *Enforcing the English Reformation in Ireland Clerical Resistance and Political Conflict in the Diocese of Dublin, 1534-1590*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 195.

⁹ Alan Ford, *The Protestant Reformation in Ireland, 1590-1641*, 2nd ed., Four Courts Press, 1997, 68.

in Ireland and reject some of the Edwardian Reformation forced on the Irish churches. Queen Mary reestablishes the old ties with the Catholic church in Rome by abandoning the title of Supreme Head of the church.¹⁰ During the reign of Queen Mary I, a group of senior diocesan clergy in Dublin restored the Catholic church and renewed the Catholic church.¹¹ Most importantly the reopening of St. Patrick's Cathedral again as the National Cathedral of the Catholic Church in Ireland.¹² Queen Mary also moves against the reformation by executing religious and theological reformers resulting in Queen Mary gaining the nickname 'bloody Mary' by many reformers.¹³ Because of these actions Queen Mary I reign slows the protestant reformation down considerably because she establishes ties with the Catholic church while she sat on the throne of England. But during Mary's reign the Catholic church was restored in Dublin. Both the reigns of King Edward and Queen Mary results in very little reordering of the Irish church.

When Queen Elizabeth I succeeded Queen Mary I in 1558, life in Ireland truly changed. At the beginning of Queen Elizabeth's reign, Elizabeth reverses the restoration of Catholicism implemented by Queen Mary. The English policymakers also decide the reformation in Ireland is a failure and decide to have a different approach, this time with a military approach to unify England and Ireland into one church. During the first meeting of the Irish Parliament during Queen Elizabeth's rule, legislation was passing rejecting all acts of Queen Mary that were in favor of the Catholics. Starting in 1559, all officers must take the Oath of Supremacy and anyone who maintains the Supremacy of Rome must forfeit his estate. This act again made the monarch

¹⁰ Felicity Heal, *Reformation in Britain and Ireland*, Oxford Univ. Press, 2008, 173.

¹¹ James A. Murray, *Enforcing the English Reformation in Ireland Clerical Resistance and Political Conflict in the Diocese of Dublin, 1534-1590*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 204.

¹² Ibid, 225.

¹³ Ibid, 209.

the Supreme Governor of the Church in England and allows her to visit churches and correct them, making the practice of the Catholic faith almost impossible. The Act of Supremacy expands to the point where bishops are to accept the oath. Three bishops, Walsh of Meath, Leverous of Kildare and Bodkin of Tuam were told to take the oath but only Bodkin took the oath while the other two refused.¹⁴ In 1559 the Act of Uniformity was reinstated ruling the Prayer book of Edward VI must be used in service.¹⁵ This put more stress on the already existing political tensions because government policies became more strict all the surviving Catholic clergy hold services in secret. Many Catholic clerics who were caught became martyrs showing how persistent the Catholic religion was during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Queen Elizabeth moves the Reformation along more than the other Tudor's making many harsh rules to stop the Catholic faith from becoming again large in Ireland.

Catholicism has been reinforced since medieval Ireland. The Irish Reformation marks the end of medieval Ireland and the beginning of Pre-Reformation in Gaelic Ireland. Before 1100, Monastic communities survived the ancient Celtic foundation and were being reordered throughout the country.¹⁶ The Monastic orders present in Ireland were the Benedictines, Cistercians, the Augustinian Canons, and Augustinian Canonesses. But Irish monasticism declined when the arrival of Mendicant friars, a monastic community that maintains communal poverty, came to Ireland. The decline can mainly because the Mendicant order is very popular among men from all social classes.¹⁷ The Cistercians were the least influenced by the changes in

¹⁴Steven G. Ellis, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors, 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule*, Longman, 1998, 228-229.

¹⁵ Felicity Heal, *Reformation in Britain and Ireland*, Oxford Univ. Press, 2008, 167.

¹⁶Samantha A. Meigs, *The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism, 1400-1690*, St. Martin's Press, 1997, 45.

¹⁷Ibid, 45-46.

mainstream Catholicism, but were familiar with the new Tridentine reforms.¹⁸ The Tridentine reform came from the Council of Trent, a large Catholic reform. This reform includes services with Western Latin, cracking down on moral laxity, and forbids the selling of indulgences. The Franciscans re-emerge in Ireland with strong influences in the Tridentine reforms. The countryside is where the Franciscans had the most influence and were deeply involved with the changing Irish religion.¹⁹ The Jesuits were another group who became heavily involved with the growing Catholic faith in Ireland. Rather than being influential in the countryside, the Jesuits were significant in the city because the majority of the population resides in the city. During their time in Ireland, they helped strengthen schools and civic devotion.²⁰ In 1542 the Jesuits sent their first missionary to Ireland to help strengthen the Catholic faith.²¹ However, when arriving in Ireland the Jesuit missionaries called the situation hopeless and it wasn't until 1560 Jesuit missionary David Wolf returned to Ireland. Although Wolf put in prison for his Catholic beliefs, he organizes grammar schools, hospitals, and monasteries.²² Because the Jesuits help reinforce the Catholic faith in a tense religious environment, it moved the Irish to get more involved in the worldly counter-reformation. Robert Wauchop, Scottish-born Archbishop of Armagh, represents Ireland at the Council of Trent and brought Tridentine ideologies to Ireland linking Ireland and the Tridentine ideologies. Tridentine theologies were involved with the reformation inside the Catholic church which became strict with moral laxities among the clergy and bans the selling of

¹⁸Ibid, 97-99.

¹⁹Ibid, 99-100.

²⁰Ibid, 100-102.

²¹Samantha A. Meigs, *The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism, 1400-1690*, St. Martin's Press, 1997, 72.

²²Ibid, 74.

indulgences. These ideologies helped push Ireland into the seventeenth-century and the end of the Reformation.

The final movement which slows down the Protestant Reformation is the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. In Ireland, the lack of the printing press with Gaelic type made the vernacular hard to accomplish until Queen Elizabeth orders a printing press that can translate the Bible into Gaelic. William Daniel, who studied at both Cambridge and University of Dublin, has three goals for the Reformation in Ireland, first to translate an Irish version of the Book of Prayers, the vernacular Bible and lastly the protestant devotional and instructive works.²³ Daniel, with the help of Nehemiah Donellan, took up the challenge of writing the vernacular into the Gaelic language after other scholars gave up from lack of materials.²⁴ After completing the Old Testament, in 1602 the New Testament was published at Trinity College and William Daniel decided to turn his work back to translating the Prayer Book into Gaelic.²⁵ The late introduction of the Old Testament in the vernacular did not help strengthen the Protestant religion that Queen Elizabeth was trying to enforce at the time.

The Reformation in Ireland was slow paced through the Tudor reign. During the reign of King Henry VIII, the first of the Tudor rule, he was declared supreme head of the church and wanted to assert English dominance over Ireland. After the death of King Henry, King Edward VI succeeded the throne. During Edward's reign, the only important Reformation act was the enforcement of the 1550 First Act of Uniformity which makes all churches adopt the book of prayer and the suppression of the National Catholic church. After Edward came Queen Mary's rule who supported the Catholic church and rejected many Edwardian laws such as the reopening

²³ Alan Ford, *The Protestant Reformation in Ireland, 1590-1641*, 2nd ed., Four Courts Press, 1997, 106.

²⁴ Ibid, 108.

²⁵ Ibid, 108.

of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Lastly, Queen Elizabeth brought back many of the Edwardian laws. But not only did these four rulers slow the Reformation in Ireland many other factors came into play. Throughout the Reformation, the Jesuits continue to send missionaries to Ireland with the goal of reinforcing the Catholic faith. The last factor which slowed the Irish Reformation was the lack of the vernacular Bible. In 1602 the Old Testament was published in the Gaelic language by William Daniel and Nehemiah Donellan. Taking into account these three different events, these issues explain why the Protestant Reformation moved so gradually through the time period of the Tudor reign. Even though Protestantism moves sluggishly during the time of the Tudor, Protestantism became a major religion in Ireland today.

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