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Irish in America

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Ireland has had to overcome many trying times to become the independent country it is today. In the mid-1800s, the Irish potato famine struck and killed millions of Irish people. Many emigrated to the United States, in hopes of finding a better life for their families. Those who stayed behind were caught up in a variety of major events in Ireland. From casualties in World War I to destruction in the Anglo-Irish War and Ireland’s Civil War, Ireland’s independence was earned with a cost to the Irish people and to the Irish-Americans who had left the country.

World War I had a major impact on Ireland. At the time, Ireland was split between a unionist and nationalist country. In 1914, Ireland sent many men to fight in World War I. Many men enlisted to aid the British. Others enlisted for a multitude of reasons. Some men were in search of employment, as jobs were very limited in Ireland during the time. Others were looking for adventure, and some wanted to promote the idea of “home-rule” as they wanted Ireland to be an independent country that ruled itself. Of the 210,000 Irish men who enlisted, 35,000 died in the First World War.

Using World War I as a divergence, the Irish were able to devise a plan to attack the British in order to gain independence. The plan was to rebel against Britain, and launch a counterattack for freedom. Although the Irish people knew they had a very slim chance of winning this battle, they were too proud and determined to revise the plans. On Easter Monday in 1916, the Easter Rising occurred. The Irish people took over the General Post Office, in order to fly the Ireland republic flag. Forced by the British, the two rebel leaders, James Connelly and Patrick Pearce, surrendered and were then ordered to be executed. Their executions further fueled the Irish desire for independence, and the movement grew in support. On that fateful day, approximately 400 people were killed or wounded in the battle for Ireland’s independence.

Fueled by this hatred for the British, Ireland entered into the Irish War of Independence, also known as the Anglo-Irish War, against Britain. The war lasted from January of 1919 through July of 1921. In the beginning, there was isolated violence. However, this period of limited violence was short-lived. The Irish government had enacted a special police force, the Royal Irish Constable, to keep the peace in Ireland. The Irish Republican Army declared war on this nationalist group because they were allies with Britain. The fighting was undisciplined, and often innocent bystanders were caught in the crossfire. However, support continued to grow for the IRA. In November, 1920, Bloody Sunday became a day that will long be remembered. The IRA, led by Michael Collins, was focused on ridding Ireland of the British intelligence, and they shot 11 British agents. In retaliation, the British fired into a crowd of civilians at a football game killing 12 people. Both sides suffered casualties in this senseless altercation.

Despite this intense fighting, the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 was passed which ratified the idea of home rule in Ireland. This act established two Parliaments, one for the Unionists (Northern Ireland) and one for Nationalists (Southern Ireland), but both still under British control. Elections were held in 1921, and the Unionists won the seats in the North and the Sinn Fein party won the seats in the South. The Sinn Fein party refused to recognize the Parliament set up by the British and created their own Dail Eireann, or parliament. A truce in the Anglo-Irish War was signed, and Britain finally gave independence to the majority of Ireland in hopes of avoiding another guerilla warfare attack and additional lives lost. In the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922, Britain agreed to allow 26 counties of Ireland to be free and established the Irish Free State. Britain maintained control of the six northern counties known as Northern Ireland. Unrest continued in Northern Ireland between the Catholics and the Protestants for months to come.

Michael Collins, on behalf of the IRA, signed this treaty with the British. He did not consult anyone one this decision and he was often considered a traitor for agreeing to the terms. The Irish were not satisfied with the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Some still wanted the country to maintain British rule, while others wanted all of Ireland to be an independent state. This dissatisfaction caused a break in the Sinn Fein party. Fighting between the IRA and the new Irish government erupted into the Irish Civil War. The war began after elections in June of 1922, and ended in May of 1923. The war ended after the Free State forces captured the Republican leader, Liam Deasy. The Free State also executed many other Republican leaders, leaving the army without guidance. A ceasefire was eventually called, and the Free State fighters were considered the winner of the civil war. There was considerable loss of life and destruction of property and historical data. Bridges, railroads, and infrastructures had been damaged or destroyed. Census data that had been collected through the years had been destroyed making genealogical searches almost impossible.

During this time, the Irish found a great support system with those who had emigrated to the United States. These Irish-Americans enjoyed the freedom they had gained from Britain, and they wanted their homeland ancestors to experience this same sense of freedom. According to IrishRoots.org, the Irish in America knew about the Easter Rising weeks before the event actually occurred. This gave the Irish-Americans the opportunity to collect and send money to help their homeland. It became a joint cause for both the native Irish and those who emigrated to the United States. Dezell states, “United in their anger at ruthless reprisals against the men who led the Easter Rebellion… Irish-Americans tried to capitalize on public awareness and criticism of British brutality in Ireland” (199). Irish-Americans voiced their support for Ireland’s independence. In 1919, a report by Irish-American “Friends of Freedom” condemned British war tactics in Ireland. Between 1920 and 1921, the American Commission on the Conditions in Ireland published testimonies of witnesses that embarrassed the British government. Through money and publications, Irish-Americans tried their best to support the efforts of Irish independence.

Although the Irish-Americans supported the Easter Rising, some opinions changed after part of Ireland was granted independence. The Irish-Americans were perturbed that Northern Ireland was still controlled by Britain. These people were also distraught after hearing that “Ireland must be ‘Gaelic as well as free’” (McCafferty 154). Irish nationalism became overwhelming to the Irish-Americans, especially because they had started a new life, speaking English and living the American ways and values. Since many had lived in the United States for a while, these Irish-Americans were becoming more American, and less Irish, causing a rift between them and their homeland. A feeling of alienation also became more prevalent for the Irish-Americans as they felt betrayed by their homeland, a country they loved so much that they were willing to help support its war with Britain. Ireland suffered greatly in its bid for independence. Irish-Americans did the best they could to support their homeland with monetary donations and political writings. Alienation and separation from Ireland left many Irish-Americans conflicted in their allegiance between their new life in America and their devotion to their home country.

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