

A History of the Irish Church since 1800.

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- The Act of Union.
- The Second Reformation.
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The Act of Union.

The Rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798 provoked the British Government into incorporating Ireland fully into the United Kingdom. The Pitt administration, with the help of the O'Neil interest in the Irish Parliament managed to push through the Act of Union that suppressed the Dublin Parliament, and created Irish seats at Westminster. The legislation had serious flaws, the worst of which was that, although most civil penalties against Roman Catholics had already been repealed, they were denied the vote and could not sit in Parliament. The 1801 Act failed to address these issues, but this was unintended. Pitt had wished to give Roman Catholics the vote, but King George III would not agree to it. Hannoverian obtuseness ensured that the Roman Catholic population did not get the vote, or the right to sit in Parliament, until 1829. Deeply flawed as it was, the Act of Union was the basis for the government of Ireland for the next 121 years.

In addition to the civil provisions of the act there were ecclesiastical provisions. The Act provided for the Union of the Church of Ireland with the Church of England, though only a minority of the twenty-two Irish bishops received seats in the Westminster House of Lords. Those Prayer Books printed between 1801 and 1870 usually carry the following title "The Book of Common Prayer... according to the Use of the United Church of England and Ireland".

Like the Church of England, the Church of Ireland was a rather moribund organisation in the year 1800. However, the Church was showing signs of renewed vigor. The Board of First Fruits was providing funding to rebuild Churches all over Ireland. These churches can usually be identified by their design a box-like combined nave and sanctuary with a western tower usually built in a simplified Gothic style. Ireland was also experiencing an Evangelical revival led by churchmen of the prominence of Archbishop Plunket of Tuam which brought a new generation of converts into the Irish Church.

The Second Reformation.

The Second Reformation is the name some historians have attached to the period between 1800 and 1877 during which the Church of Ireland renewed itself from within. Evangelicals were the major contributors to this renewal, but Protestant High Churchmen such as Richard Mant, Bishop of Down and Connor, and Tractarian Archbishop R. C. Trench of Dublin also made major contributions. In the process the Church became strong enough to withstand the trauma of Disestablishment in 1871, and to turn the period 1870s and 1880s into a golden era.

The first significant event of this period was the readjustment of diocesan boundaries made under the Irish Church Temporalities Act 1833. At the time the Church of Ireland accounted for 12% of the Irish population, yet was served by no less than twenty-two bishops many of whom received handsome salaries for serving tiny dioceses with a couple dozen parishes. No diocese was untouched by the amalgamations except Meath and Limerick, which were home for large numbers of Protestant farmers in those days. The Act produced a storm of protest in England and led to a High Church reaction known as the Oxford Movement which stressed the Catholic side of the Anglican inheritance. In Ireland the response was more muted due to the on-going tithe war.

The Tithe War was an organised and occasionally violent protest against paying the Church tax or tithe

to the minority Church of Ireland. At this time tithes were paid by the tenants who were predominantly Roman Catholic. To resolve the dispute, the Government again stepped in and converted tithes into a land tax paid by the largely Church of Ireland landowners. This resolved the dispute for the time being, but tithes were abolished before disestablishment in the 1870s.

The Famine of 1845 to 1848 was a disaster for all in Ireland and the situation was made all the worse by the replacement of an interventionist Tory government under Sir Robert Peel, by a Whig government which would not import food in sufficient quantities to prevent mass starvation. The following three years were truly horrendous with tens of thousands starving to death. The Church of Ireland clergy did what they could to relieve the hunger of their neighbours, but with the potato crop failures church revenues fell dramatically, and the amount the Church could do was very limited.

After the horror of the Great Hunger, the 1850s and 60s were a relatively quiet period in the Church's history, though not without the odd echo of the controversies that rocked the Church of England. Congregations were prosperous enough in many cases to be able to afford to rebuild their churches, often for the second since 1800, and the restoration of Ireland's ancient cathedrals and churches was begun. The best know of these early restorations being that of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, by the Guinness family in the 1850 and 60s. In the larger towns new parishes were established like St Peter's, Belfast, and All Saints, Grangegorman in Dublin which, unusually for Ireland, became a bastion for Anglo-Catholicism.

Therefore the news of W.E.Gladstone's Irish Church Disestablishment Bill came it to a relatively peaceful Church.

To be completed soon.

The Rev. Peter Robinson. This version - 25-05-2002.

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Email: revpdr@webtv.net