

What did 'Patriotism' mean in Eighteenth-Century Ireland?

'Patriotism' and the term 'Patriot' refer to a new awareness of Irishness that emerged toward the end of the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century. The birth of Patriotism was as a result of several contributory factors following the Jacobite wars at the end of the seventeenth century. Ireland's constitutional status as a separate kingdom had been supported by opponents of Thomas Wentworth (1640-1) and reaffirmed at the convention of 1660-61 that rejected claims of English legislative supremacy. Professor Connolly notes that such proclamations of independence "*foreshadowed eighteenth century patriotism*".¹

The nature of patriotism was exemplified by the writings of prominent figures throughout the period and demonstrated the desire for the Protestant Ascendancy to maintain their own rights and call for a certain degree of legislative independence or at least representation. The writings of Molyneux and Swift were not just about independence. In *The Case* Molyneux suggested that the "*kingdom of Ireland [join] the Union*" but it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the English saw political gain in such a move. By this time however, patriotism had developed into its own form of nationalism in favour of their own fully independent parliament, arguing for constitutional and commercial equality with England. Patriots began to see English legislative authority as "*slavery to be governed by laws made without representation*".² The notion of Patriotism meant different things throughout the eighteenth century and as a result, what the term means needs to be looked at in various ways as the century progressed.

Though the 1689 parliament that had been called by James II in 1689 was "*more representative of the whole of Ireland than any assembly before modern times*", the Williamite war made it ineffective. With a grant of £1,200,000 for the taking of Ireland, the 'war of the two kings' finally settled the power struggle in Ireland.³ Thomas Davis referred to this parliament as the 'patriot parliament', perhaps inaccurately. Patriotism as defined above was that of a largely protestant basis. However, of the 230 that returned to the commons, just six were protestant;⁴ this hardly justifies a protestant presence to the extent that the parliament could be described as patriot. Davis, as a Young Irelander, might be guilty of selective history in this sense. As the founder of *Nation* and opposed to the Anglicised nature of Irish culture, his historical basis is partisan. He sees the parliament of 1689 as the beginning of the Dublin parliament that existed up until 1800. It was not. The Penal (or Popery) Laws confirmed upon Dublin the nature of a solely protestant assembly that existed well into the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, if his description is based upon the principles that the Protestant Ascendancy began to demonstrate such as self-governance and independence from Westminster, this 1689 parliament could be seen to contain a high degree of

¹ S L Connolly (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Irish History* (Oxford 1999) hereafter *Connolly*, p.114

² James Lydon *The Making of Ireland* (1998) hereafter *Lydon* p.233-34

³ *Lydon* p.209-211

⁴ *Lydon* p.209

patriot sentiment. Despite these principles that existed at that parliament, under an English act in 1691, Catholics were bared from parliament: "*When the parliament of 1692 assembled, several Catholics presented themselves to take their seats, but the oath imposed by the English Act of 1691 was tendered to them, and they were excluded*".⁵ As a result, the parliament that existed in Dublin following the Williamite war was protestant and unrepresentative. It therefore allowed Protestant Ascendancy patriotism to flourish.

The Revolution of 1668 enhanced the status of the Irish parliament and encouraged novel constitutional aspirations. The aspirations here are not so much about confirming protestant dominance within Irish society, this came later. Roy Foster refers to the period as one "*ensuring some degree of toleration for the Irish population*". To Foster, the later birth of patriotism was as a result of an "*intense feeling of insecurity*" and demonstrated the protestant response to Catholic ingratitude. Protestants linked the convened Jacobite parliament of 1689 back to Wentworth and beyond. As a result, "*the characteristics of the Irish eighteenth century began in the 1690s*".⁶ Protestant Ascendancy thus emerged with the final defeat of the Catholics in the Williamite war (1689-91) and confirmed the dominance of this protestant minority at the zenith of Irish society. Initially of course, the main bulk of legislation referred to ensuring protestant security in the kingdom and as a result does not signify a high level of what could be described as patriot idealism; this manifested itself in the degree of anti-Catholic legislation enacted in the penal laws. However, once security had been established it was possible for protestant ideals to diversify and contribute to a growing notion of patriotism based upon representation in law.

If Irish Patriotism can be defined in international terms, there is no greater similarity than with the American revolutionaries that emerged throughout the eighteenth-century. Patriotism in Ireland represented the necessity of secure settlement of lands, protestant security and the desire for cheap governance maintained by low taxation according to Roy Foster.⁷ It predates American calls for self-governance to a certain extent, even the terminology used. For example, the Dublin University representative William Molyneux wrote: "*liberty seems the independent right of all mankind*" and that to tax the Irish people "*without [their] consent is little better, if at all, than downright robbing [them]*".⁸ Like American protestant cries for independence, patriotism was firmly founded in issues of taxation, religious liberty, and 'government by consent'. The American Revolution echoed terminology and ideologies that had been formulated largely as a result of the Williamite wars of the late seventeenth century. Therefore, what was to be called 'patriotism' was centred upon the principle of legislative consent and "*founded firmly on the principles of 1688*".⁹

⁵ Mary Hayden and George A. Moonan *A Short History of The Irish People* (Dublin, date not published) hereafter *Hayden* p.361

⁶ R F Foster 'Ascendancy and Union' in R F Foster (ed.) *The Oxford History of Ireland* (Oxford 1992) hereafter *Foster* p.134-5

⁷ *Foster*, p.141

⁸ *Lydon*, p.229

⁹ *Foster* p. 140

Patriot sentiment grew within the protestant nation largely due to the resented status of the parliament under Poyning's law and the Declaratory Act. Furthermore, the appointment of Englishmen to positions in civil, military and ecclesiastical establishments caused many grievances. Patriot writers such as Molyneux, Swift and Lucas echoed calls for self-governance, with Ireland's own laws and institutions under the crown. According to the journalist Robert Kee; the Patriots "*built for themselves a whole sophisticated culture, reflected not only in their houses, but also in [their] literature*", which curiously, "*was the first version of modern Irish nationalism: a Protestant version*".¹⁰ This patriot sentiment can be seen during the Wood's half pence affair (1722-5) with opponents claiming it would flood the Irish economy with worthless coin and during the Money Bill dispute (1753-6) where patriots asserted that the repayment of the national debt was a parliamentary matter, as agreed under the Sole Right Controversy in 1692, and was no concern of the king or Westminster.¹¹ In the words of James Lydon; "*Legislation without representation was not natural*".¹² Once again, this opposition can be explained by the writings of Molyneux as mentioned above and by the American principle of 'government by consent'. This was to become the basis for the patriot Dublin parliament over the next century and across the Atlantic, the American Revolution.

Patriots did more than just demand independence from the British parliament. They resented trade acts imposed at Westminster, largely as a result of the interests of the English domestic market. The Cattle Acts (1663, 1671, 1681) and the Woollen Acts (1699) that imposed duty on Irish products entering England were both heavily opposed. The Woollen Acts were a severe restriction to Irish textile production. It denied the transport of wool to anywhere other than England. It weakened the manufacturing industry because tariffs were in place already and existed until 1779; it created what Mary Hayden has called "*The Ruin of Irish Trade*".¹³ Patriotism voiced the requirements of protestant interests. Although, penal legislation was bore out of protestant insecurities vis-à-vis Catholics and France in the early eighteenth century, demonstrating very "*real fears that existed*",¹⁴ opposition to economic restrictions represented a wider non-partisan interest. Patriotism and the 'Protestant Ascendancy' was not consistently about anti-Catholic legislation therefore, it had more complex issues too. Indeed, although the period began with the creation of much anti-Catholic legislation, the majority had been overturned by the time of the Union as Protestants became more secure. Largely however, it must be noted that despite patriot concerns regarding economic restrictions, the Dublin government remained relatively impotent in countering them. As late as 1746, it was possible for Westminster to enact legislation that denied the export of Irish glass; this followed 1737 legislation that had previously limited glass exports to Britain alone.¹⁵ Despite

¹⁰ Robert Kee *Ireland: A History* (1997), hereafter *Kee* p.56

¹¹ *Connolly* p.435, p.598, p307

¹² *Lydon*, p.228

¹³ *Hayden*, p.372-374

¹⁴ *Lydon*, p.221

¹⁵ *Hayden*, p.373

English interference in the Irish economy, it has been disputed that this “*meant the strangling of an infant industry*” as much diversification took place, particularly from wool into yarn and fabric production.¹⁶ Therefore, although the Dublin parliament existed from the seventeenth century, it began in a subservient manner to Westminster and remained as a tool for domestic English, and from 1707, British interests.

For the most part of this Protestant Ascendancy, the patriots had little legislative power. However, towards the 1770s, patriot political groupings began to emerge. Flood and Grattan, in the commons, and Charlemont, in the lords, emerged as strong political figures. It was they that allowed the mobilisation of popular support that was facilitated by tensions of the American Revolution and through free trade agitation. These factors allowed the Dublin parliament to achieve commercial freedom and extensive constitutional concessions.¹⁷ Politicians such as Flood and Grattan were the driving forces behind legislative independence in 1782. This legislation, often described as the ‘new constitution of 1782’, modified Poyning’s law, repealed the Declaratory Act, established the independence of Irish judges and made the House of Lords the highest court of appeal in Ireland. It has largely been attributed to Grattan and as a result, the post 1782 parliament was known simply as ‘Grattan’s Parliament’. However, it was through agitation and a continuing public campaign that Flood became instrumental in the formation of a greater legislative independence as a result of the renunciation act on 17 April 1783.¹⁸ Although the extent of independence achieved allowed more political power to be held at Dublin, the Westminster government could not be totally ignored.

The many parts of the new constitution or the renunciation act did not give legislative independence in practice; the Westminster parliament could still veto Irish legislation, the power of the Irish executive was with British politicians and there were uncertainties in the position of Dublin’s in foreign affairs. However, it is important to note that from 1783 until the Act of Union, the power of veto was used just four times. For the most part, it was necessary for the British Government to acknowledge independent Irish legislation. Despite this apparent patriot liberty, “*the future of the ‘independent Irish Nation’ of 1782 was in fact deadlocked*”, without parliamentary reform the power still remained at Westminster in the hands of Royal ministers.¹⁹ The Patriots did not achieve total independence therefore, but they did achieve ‘government by consent’; although Irish bills could still be vetoed, legislation could not be imposed upon them.

Patriotism was indeed a form of protestant independent ideals and demonstrated a growing desire for more accountable government through legislative independence. Furthermore, it was a notion that demonstrated that Ireland was a Nation of her own, accountable to herself with her sovereign right to self-determination. Although the Protestant Ascendancy began with

¹⁶ Foster, p.143

¹⁷ Connolly, p.435

¹⁸ Lydon, p.242

¹⁹ Kee, p.59

penal laws, the continuing dismantling of them toward the end of the 1700s signified an evolving political state represented by patriots such as Grattan and Swift. In both politics and in literature, patriotism transformed Anglo-Irish protestants into 'the Irish'. Although it excluded the majority of the population, the Catholics, it would be interesting to speculate on how patriotism and the 'Nation' might have evolved had the Irish MPs not been bribed in what Eric Evans called the '*Annus Mirabilis* of 1800'.²⁰ The Catholic relief acts, economic initiatives and Grattan's social reforms indicated that patriotism might have evolved Ireland into a modern nation state. As it is, patriotism was a protestant independence movement but one that few modern Irish Republicans would describe as un-Irish.

[Words: 1981]

²⁰ Eric J Evans Forging of a Modern State: 1783-1870 (1993) p.97-98

Bibliography

- S L Connolly (ed.) The Oxford Companion to Irish History (Oxford 1999)
- James Lydon The Making of Ireland (1998)
- Paul Johnson A History of the American People (1997)
- Mary Hayden and George A. Moonan A Short History of The Irish People (Dublin, date not published)
- R F Foster (ed.) The Oxford History of Ireland (Oxford 1992)
- R F Foster Modern Ireland 1600-1972 (1989)
- Robert Kee Ireland: A History (1997)
- Eric J Evans Forging of a Modern State: 1783-1870 (1993)