

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Reading, Writing, and Revolution: Education and Its Role in the Irish and American
Bids For
Independence

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In his correspondence with Benjamin Franklin, Cadwallader Colden offered this insight into the source of a nation's power:

It is a common agreement that the power and strength of a nation consists in its riches and money. No doubt money can do great things but I think the power of a nation consists in the knowledge and virtue of its inhabitants and in proof of this history everywhere almost shows us that the richest nations abounding in silver and gold have been generally conquered by poor but in some sense virtuous nations.¹

Colden penned these words in November of 1749, but little did he realize that the next half-century would prove the truth of his belief. In 1776 the American colonies formally severed ties to Great Britain, and after seven years of war were granted their independence from the mother country. 15 years later in 1798 another revolution broke out with similar intentions, this time in Ireland. The Irish rebellion, unfortunately, did not follow the course of the American Revolution. By 1800 the rebellion was quelled and the Irish were rewarded, not with their independence, but with an Act of Union, officially making Ireland a part of the United Kingdom. One key factor that contributed heavily to the failure of the Irish and the success of the Americans in gaining their independence was education. The Irish system of education was subject to the tight control of the English Crown. Irish schooling, instead of educating the populace, proved to be restrictive, repressive, and inefficient. In addition, both Irish Protestants and Catholics viewed religion as an inseparable part of their identity; hence education was used as a tool to preserve religious traditions. As a result very little secularization of education

¹ Cadwallader Colden to Benjamin Franklin, November, 1749, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, edited by Leonard W. Labaree and Whitfield J. Bell, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), III, 431-432.

occurred. This, coupled with England's rigid control, hindered the Irish from physically and mentally preparing for independence, which greatly contributed to their defeat at the hands of the English when revolution did break out. Conversely, education in the American colonies was allowed to flourish without any direct intervention from the English government. Over time schools like Harvard College shifted their focus away from religious matters and towards secular issues facing the colonies. The result was the creation of an identity distinctively different from the English, as well as a segment of society equipped with the physical skills and mental abilities necessary to sustain a drive for independence.

Most scholars and historians of the American colonial period agree that education was crucial in preparing the colonists for independence. Joel Spring stresses the point that the classical education in Greek and Roman wisdom offered in grammar schools did not just prepare students for college, but also prepared them for civic and religious responsibilities and leadership.² He adds, "It is significant to note that after the American Revolution, many leaders, including Thomas Jefferson, began to view American colleges as the source of republican leadership; this idea had its roots in sixteenth and seventeenth-century educational arguments."³ Sheldon Cohen writes that the secularization of education led colonists, especially New Englanders, to increase their willingness to develop educational concepts and institutions which met the needs arising from new situations, such as a rebellion from England.⁴ "By 1750 it is clearly evident," according to Ellwood Cubberley, "that European traditions and ways and manners and social

² Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642 – 1985* (New York: Longman, 1986), 8.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Sheldon Cohen, *A History of Colonial Education, 1607 – 1776* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974.), 79.

customs and types of schools were no longer completely satisfactory. There is clearly manifest a desire to modify all these various forces so as to adapt them better to purely American needs.”⁵ After 1750 Americans felt the need to consider more closely politics, human rights, and the concept of liberty, and Cubberley feels that education, especially in the area of disputation, allowed the colonists to better delve into such subjects.⁶ At the end of his exhaustive look at colonial education Lawrence Cremin states outright that education taught the colonists how to be independent and self-sufficient, and the success of the American Revolution reflected the success of colonial education.⁷

Irish historians seem somewhat conflicted as to the state of Ireland during the eighteenth century. According to R.B. McDowell, Irishmen as a whole approved of the social, political, and economic concepts governing Ireland, but they were dissatisfied with the inner workings of such concepts.⁸ He claims that over time the mercantilist policies of England stunted the enormous potential Ireland’s woolen industry, weakening the Irish economy.⁹ Yet McDowell believes that the Irish in general, though living near subsistence, enjoyed relatively comfortable lives, being content with warm homes, sturdy clothes, full diets, and good friends.¹⁰ J. L. McCracken, however, disputes this belief. He pointedly states that the Catholic Irish were a “defeated, depressed, and leaderless

⁵ Ellwood Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1934), 75.

⁶ Cubberley, 68.

⁷ Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 554-556.

⁸ R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution: 1760 – 1801* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

⁹ McDowell, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

people.”¹¹ This was important, because Catholics were by far the largest social and religious group in Ireland, making up over 70% of the total population by 1733.¹² R.F. Foster notes that eighteenth century Ireland was characterized by tensions between Catholics and Protestants. He writes, “To be a Protestant or a Catholic in eighteenth century Ireland indicated more than mere religious allegiance; it represented opposing political cultures and conflicting views of history.”¹³ Thomas Bartlett explains why Catholic/Protestant tensions dominated Irish affairs during this time period, “Irish Protestants were well aware that the sole basis of their claim to be not just *a people* but *the people of Ireland* lay in the destruction of Catholic power, the confiscation of Catholic land and the concurrent denial to Catholics of social and political authority.”¹⁴

Every Irish historian has his/her list of reasons why the Irish Rebellion of 1798 failed. R.F. Foster blames a lack of cooperation between the various strata of Irish society. He writes, “The idea of secular combination across the classes, in opposition to British government and in favor of national independence, had conspicuously failed to take hold. Older antipathies emerged and older allegiances were confirmed.”¹⁵ David Dickson provides a lengthy list of explanations:

Government-sanctioned counter-terror and the disarming campaigns over the previous year (1797), the re-orientation of French offensive plans from the Atlantic and the Mediterranean in 1798, the botched final preparations by Dublin and northern leaders after the arrests, the defects in radical leadership, the indecisive and over-large high command, and the cumbersome and inflexible

¹¹ J.L. McCracken, “The social structure and social life, 1714 – 1760,” in *Eighteenth Century Ireland: 1691 – 1800*, edited by T.W. Moody and W.E. Vaughn. Vol. 4 in *A New History of Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986),53.

¹² McCracken, 37.

¹³ R.F. Foster, “Ascendancy and Union,” in *The Oxford History of Ireland*, ed. by R.F. Foster (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 136.

¹⁴ Thomas Bartlett, “The Catholic Question in the Eighteenth Century,” *History Ireland*, spring (1993): 17.

¹⁵ Foster, 153.

hierarchical organisation derived from the constitutional precedents of the early 1790's, which proved easy for government to penetrate.¹⁶

Comprehensive as this list may be, it is noticeably devoid of one crucial factor: education. Few scholars have cited England's strict control over Irish education as a reason for the failure of the Irish Rebellion. Even rarer is an explanation of how and why Irish education influenced the outcome of the revolution. The lack of connections made between the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and Irish education is not due to an absence of facts to support such connections, as an analysis of primary and secondary source material will show.

Ireland in the eighteenth century did not possess independent status. It was subject to numerous political and economic restrictions imposed by the English government. The Declaratory Act of 1719, also known as "The Sixth of George I", made the Irish Lords (the highest chamber of the Irish Parliament) subordinate to the English House of Lords.¹⁷ This reinforced the centuries-old Poynings' Law of 1494, which mandated that all Irish legislation must be approved by the English king before being enacted.¹⁸ England's manipulation of Irish law gradually created a legal system designed to protect the Protestant Ascendancy (Anglican descendants of English immigrants in Ireland), and the resulting Penal Laws severely restricted and repressed Catholics. By 1691 an oath denying the doctrines of transubstantiation and papal power was required of

¹⁶ David Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland, 1660 – 1800* (Dublin: Helcion Limited, 1987), 20.

¹⁷ "Irish Parliament Act, 1719", *Selected Documents in Irish History*, edited by Josef L. Altholz (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 58-59.

¹⁸ "Poynings' Law", *Selected Documents in Irish History*, 23.

Irish members of Parliament.¹⁹ The Popery Bills of 1703-04 reduced Catholic land rights to inheritance and secure leases. They could not buy land.²⁰ In addition, the right to vote was stripped from Catholics, giving Protestants sole control of Parliament.²¹ It should be noted too that the Penal Laws also affected Presbyterians from Scotland residing in the north, though not to the degree of Catholics. The Protestant Ascendancy, though a numerical minority, asserted its dominance over the populace through legislation proposed in Dublin and passed by Parliament in London.²²

The subordination of the Irish Parliament to the English government was a hotly debated issue among all Irish Protestants since the institution of such an arrangement. “The fundamental question debated from the 1690’s was not that of independence in a ‘national’ sense, but of how far the Dublin assembly had the right of originating legislation without subsequent adaptation in London.”²³ Frustration with Irish law, and especially with the corrupt Irish Parliament, brought several hidden tensions to light. This included the increasing resentment at taxation and the difficulty domestic industry was having coping with fluctuations in the economy. England attempted to diffuse these mounting tensions by relaxing some of the Penal Laws and allowing the training of Roman Catholic priests to resume in Ireland. However, the American Revolution “provoked self-examination and aggressive demonstrations of discontent.”²⁴ Protestants like Henry Grattan and Henry Flood spearheaded successful efforts to have English trade restrictions on Ireland removed. In 1782 they were also able to obtain the repeal of

¹⁹ “An Act For The Abrogating Of The Oath Of Supremacy, 1691”, *Irish Historical Documents: 1172 – 1922*, edited by Edmund Curtis and R. B. McDowell (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), 180-183.

²⁰ “An Act to prevent the further Growth of Popery”, *Selected Documents in Irish History*, 54.

²¹ “An Act To Prevent The Further Growth Of Popery, 1704”, *Irish Historical Documents*, 193-194.

²² Bartlett, 19.

²³ Foster, 135.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

Poyning's Law and "the Sixth of George I."²⁵ Ireland had finally won the right to determine its own legislative destiny, but only on paper. Unfortunately for reformers they had failed to purge Parliament of corruption, so when reforms were made Irish MPs were quick to marginalize and undermine the changes. Those MPs not corrupt still opposed change, themselves being highly conservative Protestants of the Ascendancy. This infuriated the Irish populace, prompting the formation of the United Irishmen.

The United Irishmen believed that once corruption and waste were eliminated in the government, taxes could be reduced, lifting a burden off the shoulders of farmers and Irish industry.²⁶ Then, with this reduction in taxes and an intelligent tariff policy, Irish free trade could expand and an era of economic development would ensue, ultimately improving the conditions of all social classes in Ireland.²⁷ These policies for reform were never fully implemented, partly due to the fact that in 1794 informers working for England began outing leaders of the United Irishmen.

Theobald Wolfe Tone, a prominent advocate for republicanism and co-founder of the United Irishmen, was turned over to British authorities and exiled to America.²⁸ Instead he went to France, where he convinced the French to supply him a naval force to invade Ireland. In December 1796 Wolfe Tone left with a large French invasion fleet, commanded by General Lazare Hoche, for Bantry Bay in County Cork. Unfortunately severe storms and high winds scattered the fleet and prevented any ship from landing.²⁹ When the English, unaware of any invasion force, found out about the botched attempt,

²⁵ "Repeal of the Declaratory Act, 1782", *Selected Documents in Irish History*, 60.

²⁶ "The declaration, resolutions, and constitution of the societies of United Irishmen", *Irish Historical Documents*, 239.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Andrew Boyd, "Wolfe Tone: Republican Hero or Whig Opportunist?," *History Today* 48, no. 6 (1998):14, 19.

²⁹ *Eyewitness to 1798*, edited by Terence Folley (Boulder: Irish American Book Company, 1996), 18.

they tightened down on the Irish population, polarizing and radicalizing the people. In 1798 the United Irishmen decided to rebel, but failed to capitalize on any victories made against the English. Only the uprising in Wexford took hold, but the rebels could not leave their region and were soon defeated at Vinegar Hill by English forces. The French attempted another invasion, this time in the northwest, and made good progress, but were eventually defeated.³⁰ The rebellion effectively put down, the English government passed the Act of Union in 1800, making Ireland part of Britain, giving it status similar to that of a state in the United States.

As this brief overview of eighteenth century Irish history has shown, politics proved to be a potent force that influenced just about every critical action and event in Ireland at this time. Most spheres of life could not escape this influence, and education was no exception. As a matter of fact, one of the first attempts at constructing a national system of education in Ireland had political motives behind it. In 1537 the parish schools act was passed by the Irish Parliament, which provided:

...a good instruction in his (King Henry VIII) most blessed laws, with a conformitie, coincidence, and familiarity in language, tongue, in manners, order, and apparel...considering that there is again nothing which doth more conteyne and keep many of his subjects of the said land in a certain savage and wilde kind and manner of living, then the diversitie that is betwixt them in tongue, language, order, and habit.³¹

The goal of the law was to promote the use of the English language in Ireland by establishing a network of English schools in each parish. However, this piece of

³⁰ *Eyewitness to 1798*, 83-86.

³¹ Qtd. in *Report from the commissioners of the board of education in Ireland; eleventh report, parish schools* (1810-11), 269.

legislation was not designed to help educate the Irish populace. The parish schools act instead sought to bolster the loyalty of the Anglo-Irish and recapture the allegiance of rebel English living in Ireland, especially the poor.³² For quite some time after 1537, parish schools were few and far between in Ireland. The Protestant clergy, who were charged with establishing these schools, refused to do so. The lack of resources, bitterness toward the English crown, and lax enforcement of the law only encouraged the clergy to neglect these schools.³³ They did not even begin to become common until the mid-eighteenth century. By this time the purpose of parish schools had shifted from teaching English to promoting Protestantism. As a result Catholics shied away from sending their children there.³⁴ As one might expect attendance at such schools was weak as a result. By 1788 an estimated 11,000 children were being educated at parish schools.³⁵ At the beginning of the nineteenth century the eleventh report from the commissioners of the board of education in Ireland had this assessment of parish schools: “We are fully persuaded of their inadequacy, as a system of general education of the poor, even if it were practicable to establish an effective one in every union....”³⁶

In 1570 another education bill was passed, this time establishing diocesan schools. Again targeting Anglo-Irish, the bill provided for a free school in each diocese. The headmaster had to be either a native Englishman or English by birth.³⁷ Thus in these schools the Irish were stripped of the privilege and right to educate themselves. In 1725 local Protestant hierarchies were given the authority to cede up to one acre to these

³² Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Experiment: The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 22.

³³ Akenson, 23.

³⁴ Akenson, 24.

³⁵ *Report from the commissioners of the board of education in Ireland; eleventh report, parish schools*, 273.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 275-276.

³⁷ Akenson, 26.

diocesan schools, and in 1755 grand juries from the community were given the power to tax their respective counties in order to build and maintain such schools. Unfortunately neither provision was taken advantage of on a wide scale. By 1788, 18 of the 34 dioceses reporting to the government had diocesan schools, with a total of 324 students enrolled.³⁸

The English government invested in two other types of schools. Beginning in the early seventeenth century with James I and continuing with Charles I, funds were granted for the establishment of royal schools, especially in Ulster. Even though they were well funded, those living in Ulster were slow in establishing these schools. The fourth type of school was the charter school. In this case the English Parliament granted funds to private charitable organizations in order to start schools. The vast majority of charter schools were established with the goal of converting Catholic children to Protestantism.

The *Parliamentary Papers: Evidence 2* states this directly:

...the generality of the Papish natives were kept by their clergy in gross ignorance, and bred up in great disaffection to the government; that the erecting of the Protestant Charter Schools in those places would be absolutely necessary for their conversion and civilization; that the English parish schools were not sufficient for that purpose, and that the residence only of the parochial clergy could not fully answer the end...³⁹

Thomas Wyse maintained that “the charter-school system was ultra-fanatic – it was formed for the purpose of fanaticizing the country – it out-churched the church; it was determined to educate outright into Protestantism, and carry the nation by a *coup de*

³⁸ Qtd. in Thomas Wyse, *Speech of Thomas Wyse, Esq., M.P. in the house of commons on Tuesday, May 19, 1835 on moving leave to bring in a bill for the establishment of a board of national education, and the advancement of elementary education in Ireland* (Dublin, 1835), 33.

³⁹ Qtd. in Robert E. Ward, *An Encyclopedia of Irish Schools, 1500 – 1800* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 13.

*main.*⁴⁰ Wyse later referred to a 1787 inquiry that had found “many of the schools were much out of repair, and going to ruin; that the children were neither well-clothed, well-fed, nor well taught; that some of them were at Santry School who had previously been six years at that of Ballycastle, could not read.”⁴¹ Edward Wakefield in 1812 levied similar charges against charter schools when he wrote, “Had it answered either of the professed purposes – by instructing the people or converting them to Protestants, it had taught them useful knowledge, or made them abandon their superstitious errors, I should not find fault with it; but as it professes one thing, while it aims at another, it has failed in both, and is no less absurd than it is useless.”⁴² Needless to say, Catholics saw first hand the realities of such assessments and consequently kept their children out of schools. This fact is attested to by Thomas Wyse’s statistic that in ninety-three years, 12,000 children were educated by charter schools, a mere fourth of the number educated each year by the Catholic clergy.⁴³

It cannot be disputed that, on paper, the English government put forth numerous efforts to create a national network of education in Ireland. Yet in practice a different story emerged. Not only were the various state sponsored schools inept and inefficient, but they also rarely provided education to Ireland’s largest demographic group, the Catholics. Arthur O’Connor, in his address to the free electors of county Antrim, urged them to “go to the established (Protestant) clergy, who pocket those monstrous funds for instructing nine-tenths of the nation which should provide decent establishments for three such countries as Ireland, and tell them to preach to the nine-tenths who are excluded

⁴⁰ Wyse, *Speech of Thomas Wyse*, 31.

⁴¹ Thomas Wyse, *Historical Sketch of the Late Catholic Association of Ireland*, vol. 2 (London, 1829), appendix lx.

⁴² Edward Wakefield, *An Account of Ireland Statistical and Political*, vol. 2 (London, 1812), 406.

⁴³ Wyse, *Historical Sketch*, appendix lx.

from this glorious half of the constitution.”⁴⁴ Instead they functioned as centers of conversion and subjugation. Unfortunately the implicit restrictions on Catholic education were often coupled with explicit ones contained in legislation. The Penal Laws banned Catholics from setting up their own schools, and even prohibited Catholics from taking a teaching position of any kind.⁴⁵ In addition, all regular Catholic clergy were expelled from Ireland, which effectively removed a class of individuals who possessed the skills and knowledge needed to educate.⁴⁶ This raises an interesting question: if the majority of Catholics avoided sending their children to state controlled schools, and the Penal Laws prohibited them from establishing schools of their own, then how were roughly 48,000 children, according to Thomas Wyse’s estimate above, educated each year by the Catholic clergy? The answer lies in Ireland’s network of hedge schools.

As a result of the Penal Laws and biases in the national system of education, Catholics had no choice but to take their education underground. They did this by establishing schools dubbed hedge schools. They were called such because classes were literally held behind a row of hedges or in a ditch, with a child posted as a lookout for the authorities.⁴⁷ Catholic peasants paid a schoolmaster to educate their children, and the schoolmaster would secretly do this until the money ran out or local authorities got too suspicious. The schoolmaster accepted a life of risk when he decided to teach at hedge schools, and there was ample reason for him to fear prosecution if he was discovered by the authorities. For example, between 1711 and 1722 the Limerick grand jury had

⁴⁴ Arthur O’Connor, *Address to the Free Electors of the County of Antrim* (Philadelphia: Snowden & McCorkle, 1797), 5.

⁴⁵ “An Act To Prevent The Further Growth Of Popery, 1704”, *Irish Historical Documents*, 189-190.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁷ Antonia McManus, *The Irish Hedge School and Its Books, 1695 – 1831* (Portland, Four Courts Press, 2002), 16.

nineteen indictments against Catholic schoolmasters brought before it.⁴⁸ According to the Penal Laws the penalty for a convicted schoolmaster was three months' imprisonment and a fine of twenty pounds, with the possibility of banishment to the Barbadoes and the death penalty if he returned to Ireland.⁴⁹ Since this was an underground movement not much concretely has been recorded about it. We do know that the three R's – reading, writing, and arithmetic – were heavily stressed in hedge schools, with arithmetic being the most dominant subject.⁵⁰ Religion too was a major part of the lessons. Donald Akenson has described the instructors of these schools as products of “educational incest”, because often times they themselves were graduates from hedge schools.⁵¹

The children in hedge schools were taught to read from primers and spelling books, very much like American children in the colonies. Once they completed these readings the students moved on to any book they could get their hands on. Here is a sample curriculum for students who had advanced beyond these basic books:

History of the seven champions of christendom
 History of Montelion, knight of the oracle
 History of Parismus and Parismenes
 History of Irish rogues and rapparees
 History of Freney, a notorious robber, teaching them the most dexterous mode of robbing
 History of the most celebrated pirates
 History of Jack, the bachelor, a noted smuggler
 History of Fair Rosamond and Jane Shore, two prostitutes
 History of Donna Rosina, a Spanish courtesan
 Ovid's Art of Love
 History of witches and apparitions
 The devil and Dr. Faustus

⁴⁸ McManus, 17.

⁴⁹ *An act to restrain foreign education* (7 William III, c. 4).

⁵⁰ Akenson, 52.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

Moll Flanders, highly edifying no doubt
New system of boxing by Mendoze⁵²

Donald Akenson describes why the Irish Catholics would go to such lengths to develop an underground system of education:

In its attempts to conquer the Irish Catholics, the English realized that they had to reduce them to a cultural level as low as that of a preliterate society. To effect such a brutalization the extinction of Catholic educational institutions was a requirement. Significantly, the Roman Catholic peasant clung to education for the same reason that the Protestants attempted to suppress it: without schooling the Catholics would be ground into economic helplessness, permanent social inferiority, and religious ignorance.⁵³

One would think that, with the restrictive Penal Laws, hedge schools would have had enough to contend with. Yet, in addition to governmental restrictions, Catholics encountered opposition to hedge schools from their own clergy. This contention arose from differing approaches to politics.

Some hedge schoolmasters, frustrated with the legal and social inequities within Ireland, took a nationalistic and somewhat aggressive approach to Irish politics.⁵⁴ Many schoolmasters worked in conjunction with local secret societies, like the Whiteboys and Rightboys, clubs known for their subversive activities. Some schoolmasters were themselves members of these societies.⁵⁵ The Catholic Church, however, took a more conciliatory approach. It was the belief of Catholic bishops that, if they worked with the

⁵² Hely Dutton, *Statistical survey of the county of Clare, with observations on the means of improvement; drawn up for the consideration and by direction of the Dublin Society* (Dublin, 1808), 236-237.

⁵³ Akenson, 50.

⁵⁴ McManus, 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

government and remained loyal to the English Crown, they would have a better chance of winning concessions for Catholics.⁵⁶ Many bishops were vocally opposed to secret societies and the hedge schoolmasters that supported them. In 1764 Bishop Burke of Ossory felt that “if they (the Whiteboys) think themselves grieved in any respect, they might be redressed by lawful ways and means. They ought to be amenable to the laws of the nation, and not provoke the government, which is mild beyond expression.”⁵⁷ In 1775 Bishop Troy of Ossory condemned outright the actions of the Whiteboys:

Everlasting Hell...When they shall be judged, may they be condemned...may their posterity be cut off in one generation. Let their children be carried about as vagabonds and beg and let them be cast out of their dwellings. May the usurers search all their substance and let strangers plunder their labours. May there be none to help them, nor none to pity their fatherless offspring. May their names be blotted out...and let their memory perish from the earth.⁵⁸

Such differences served to divide Catholics between their treasured hedge schoolmasters and their clergy. Most sympathized with the grievances and nationalistic intentions of the various secret societies, yet they were hesitant to support movements that jeopardized their religious roots. This created even more tension due to the fact that there was a shortage of Catholic priests, a problem exacerbated by the population increases in Ireland during the eighteenth century.⁵⁹ The clergy were having a hard time combating the conversion attempts of Protestants, so they consequently were forced to work with hedge schoolmasters in encouraging education in Catholic religious tradition.⁶⁰ Unfortunately

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Qtd. in McManus, 26.

⁵⁸ Qtd. in McManus, 26.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

for Catholics they were prohibited from advancing their education beyond hedge school until late into the eighteenth century. However, even when they were finally allowed to attend a university or college their selection was limited.

The only Irish university during the eighteenth century was Trinity College, Dublin, and this was an Anglican institution closely affiliated with the Church of Ireland. It was not until 1793 that Catholics could attend this school, and though Protestant dissenters were always admitted, they preferred to be educated in Scotland. According to R. B. McDowell “the most influential educational link between England and Ireland was forged by the regulations governing admission to the Irish bar.”⁶¹ Irish law students had to spend eight terms (two years) at one of the English Inns of Court. During the second half of the eighteenth century over 1,900 Irishmen, mostly Protestant, did this.⁶² The effect of studying in England was subtle yet strong. It served to water down the Irish identity each of these men possessed before they left Ireland. For example, Henry Grattan, the beloved reformer of the Irish Parliament, upon returning from spending four years at Middle Temple in London, soon grew tired of Dublin and longed for “the splendid and enraptured scenes of London.”⁶³ Not even Theobald Wolfe Tone, the father of Irish republicanism, was immune to the distraction of life in England.

Wolfe Tone admitted in his *Memoirs* that London was a “luxurious capital” and that he was preoccupied with wooing English women.⁶⁴ Though he took up a career as a political pamphleteer upon his return to Dublin, he needed the informal education of Laurence Parsons, a member of the Irish House of Commons, to awaken his senses to the

⁶¹ McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism*, 143.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Henry Grattan, *Memoirs of the life and times of Rt. Hon Henry Grattan*, vol.1 (London, 1839-1846), 152-153.

⁶⁴ *Life of Wolfe Tone*, edited by Thomas Bartlett (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1998), 26.

injustices and inequalities in Ireland. Wolfe Tone wrote, “It was he who first turned my attention on this great question, but I very soon ran far ahead of my master. It is in fact to him I am indebted for the first comprehensive view of the actual situation of Ireland.”⁶⁵ As a result Wolfe Tone determined “that the influence of England was the radical vice of our government, and consequently that Ireland would never be either free, prosperous, or happy, until she was independent, and that independence was unattainable whilst the connection with England existed.”⁶⁶ Wolfe Tone’s education, both in Ireland and England, never helped him develop an identity uniquely Irish, separate from England, nor did his education allow him to draw his own conclusions about the situation in Ireland. He received his enlightenment from an Irish reformer, a luxury the vast majority of Irish could not avail themselves of.

As far as the rest of the populace, an Irish essayist of the time noted that Ireland was so governed by England “in everything, taste as well as politics, that they seem absolutely afraid to give the stamp of approbation to anything in the first instance and hesitate whether it has merit or not until they see an English review.”⁶⁷ This was due in part to the fact that, according to R.B. McDowell, “Irishmen who worked and wrote in Ireland did not produce much that was distinctive or of striking importance in the spheres of literature, learning or even politics.”⁶⁸ Another reason for this dependency was highlighted by the poet William Preston’s observance, “The Irish, with a number of good qualities, are taken collectively, an unlettered people.”⁶⁹ Yet, to be fair, we must ask this question: if education as a process was free from the kind of control England exhibited in

⁶⁵ *Life of Wolfe Tone*, 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ A. Browne, *Sketches and hints for essays*, vol. 1 (London, 1798), 143.

⁶⁸ McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism*, 147.

⁶⁹ Qtd., in McDowell, 148.

Ireland, would it produce a sizable segment of society with a distinct identity, equipped with the traits, skills, and thinking ability needed to sustain a drive for independence? Fortunately history has provided us with a case study in order to answer this question, and it comes in the form of New England's experience with higher education in the eighteenth century. Specifically, we have the example of Harvard College.

Harvard in the eighteenth century possessed a system of lay government. This was a system in which the major decisions were made by boards of nonresident governors who were not teachers.⁷⁰ To be sure, some scholars and educators were on these boards too, but they were in the minority. This was in sharp contrast to English colleges, in which masters and fellows sat on the board, and having members of the community on the board was out of the question.⁷¹ It can be said that this community involvement in governing Harvard, as well as other colleges that followed this pattern, did to some degree relax the constraints of tradition and doctrine, for these community members had little to no experience with tradition or doctrine and hence put less emphasis on them.⁷² The community was also tied to Harvard financially. A "college corn" arrangement was established, in which each family donated a set amount of corn to the school in order to sustain it.⁷³ This was totally unheard of in England, and reinforced the community's influence in higher education and also a sense of unity and solidarity.⁷⁴

A look at the theses discussed by the Master of Arts candidates in 1743 shows how diverse and open the thinking of the students had become:

⁷⁰ Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 114.

⁷¹ Cremin, 221.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 222.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

V. Whether it be lawful to resist the Supream Magistrate, if the Common Wealth cannot otherwise be preserved?

Affirmed by Samuel Adams.

VII. Whether Civil Government ariseth out of Contract?

Affirmed by Samuel Downe.

IX. Whether the Obligation to Virtue be founded in the Abstract Relations of Things?

Affirmed by Samuel Orne.

X. Whether every Form of Divine Worship may be universally tolerated, in no manner incommoding the public good?

Affirmed by John Newman.

XVII. Whether the Christian Religion may be propagated by Force and Arms? Deny'd by James Hovey.⁷⁵

Samuel Adams believed the commonwealth had precedence over the supreme magistrate.

Samuel Downe argued that civil government arose out of a contract, which would contradict the notion of a divinely appointed monarchy. Over 40 years before the drafting of the first amendment to the Bill of Rights John Newman argued that any form of worship not damaging the public good should be tolerated. These were some very open, if not revolutionary ideas and concepts. It is hard to imagine that Oxford, Cambridge, or Trinity College would approve of such arguments, much less allow Irish students to delve into such subjects. But in New England the lack of direct control from Britain gave students the freedom to explore these topics.

Harvard, as well as other colleges using similar methods, facilitated forums of discussion that dealt less and less with the norms and traditions the colonists brought from their homeland, and more with issues pressing the colonists. An example of this can be seen in the regularly held disputations. In a 1769 letter to Thomas Hollis Andrew

⁷⁵ "Theses Discussed by Candidates for the Master of Arts Degree at Harvard". *Education in the United States*, II, 715.

Eliot wrote this about Harvard students, “The young Gentlemen are already enough taken up with politics. They have imbibed the Spirit of the times. Their declamations and forensic disputes breathe the Spirit of Liberty. This has always been encouraged, but they have sometimes wrought themselves up to such a pitch of Enthusiasm that it has been difficult to keep them within due bounds.”⁷⁶

There is no doubt that Harvard was keenly aware of the issues facing the surrounding community. Students found their own way of tackling tough questions and situations. In 1775 they organized their own protest of Indian tea. At the meeting of the President, Professors, and Tutors it was said that “... the carrying India Teas into the Hall is found to be a source of uneasiness and grief to many of the students, and as the use of it is disagreeable to the people of the Country in general...they be advised not to carry it in for the future”⁷⁷. This prohibition on India tea was decreed “...so peace and happiness may be preserved within the walls of the college whatever convulsions may unhappily distract the State abroad.”⁷⁸ Though the protest originated with and was organized by the students, the ill feelings toward Indian tea did not. Indian tea was “disagreeable to the people of the Country in general.” Harvard was not ignorant and/or immune to popular sentiments and feelings. It was acutely aware of what was going on beyond the college campus, and protests like the aforementioned one demonstrated this.

Rev. John Clayton, in describing Virginians wrote in 1684, “They have few scholars, so that everyone studies to be half physician, half lawyer and with a natural acuteness that would amuse thee. For want of books they read men the more.”⁷⁹ Cotton

⁷⁶ “Harvard College Students Caught Up in Turmoil”. *Education in the United States*, II, 718.

⁷⁷ “Harvard Students Protest Drinking of India Tea”. *Education in the United States*, II, 718.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ John Clayton to Dr. Edward Williamson, April 24, 1684, *Reverend John Clayton*, 4.

Mather five years earlier made a similar observation of New England youth when he said they seemed “very sharp, and early ripe in capacities.”⁸⁰ This curiosity and sharp mental abilities became especially crucial in the years immediately preceding the Revolution. The colonies were flooded with propaganda about the current situation with England. The general populace was curious about not just what was going on, but also about what should be done. In order to satisfy this curiosity literacy was essential. Here is where education came in. More and more colonists sought both formal and informal education that at the least would teach them how to read, and at the most how to mentally digest all the information circulating. During this time Benjamin Franklin said, “We are more thoroughly an enlightened people, with respect to our political interests, than perhaps any other under heaven. Every man among us reads, and is so easy in his circumstances as to have leisure for conversations of improvement, and for acquiring information.”⁸¹

The colonies, via their educational systems, now had a strong core of professionals that were educated in a variety of fields and could offer the services and leadership necessary to break the dependence on England, sustain the eventual revolution, and emerge as a viable nation. Adam Smith in his *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* gave several reasons why the American colonies were enjoying such prosperous times. But one of the biggest reasons was directly linked to education. As Cremin put it:

He (Adam Smith) recognized that the very productivity of the American colonies had made a mockery of mercantilism, for, given the free flow of technical

⁸⁰ Cotton Mather, *The Way to Prosperity: A Sermon Preached to the Honourable Convention of the Governour, Council, and Representatives of the Massachusetts Colony in New-England on May 23, 1689* (Boston: R. Pierce, 1690), 34.

⁸¹ Qtd. in Cremin, 444.

information and the presence of institutions for disseminating it, there was no preventing the colonials from developing their own manufacturing in the attempt to supply their own markets.⁸²

In other words, knowledge and information was the key to helping the colonies establish their independence, and the “institutions”, or educational system of the day, helped make this key available to all those who wanted or needed it.

The Irish rebellion that broke out in 1798 was doomed to failure before it even began. By this time most of the minds behind the republican movement were arrested, and there were few educated Irish left to lead the people. Hence radical leaders divided along religious lines rallied the crowds, only to be crushed by the English. Viscount Castlereagh in his June 1798 correspondence with Sir Thomas Pelham noted that, “The rebellion in Wexford has assumed a more serious shape than was to be apprehended from a peasantry, however well organised.”⁸³ Castlereagh in part blamed the Catholic clergy for this, noting that the rebels were having “their enthusiasm excited by their priests.”⁸⁴ Former United Irishman William Farrell assessed the effectiveness of such enthusiasm when he wrote, “Never before, since the world began, did such an army march on to take a garrisoned town; a set of trembling, ignorant, country men, headed by an unfortunate, foolish, enthusiastic young man. There was no obstacle in their way to prevent their going into the town; the most trifling one would have done it.”⁸⁵ Such undisciplined energy transformed the rebellion in Wexford into a movement for religious revenge. Jane Adams, a Protestant, recalled how her family tried to flee to Wales in the midst of such chaos. While onboard a boat she had this encounter:

⁸² Ibid., 555.

⁸³ Viscount Castlereagh, quoted in *Eyewitness to 1798*, 45.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ William Farrell, quoted in *Eyewitness to 1798*, 36-37.

Mrs. Cliffe has since told me that the captain's wife came up to her on deck, a little after they had got on board, and said, she hoped to be up to her knees in Protestant blood before night! that she had a brace of pistols in the belt of her gown, and swaggered up and down, repeating this horrid wish aloud.⁸⁶

She recalled that many rebels had threatened her friend Mrs. Woodcock “with a pistol at her breast, that if she had arms or Orangemen concealed, she should pay for it with her life.”⁸⁷

Ireland's system of education did not produce a strong, large group of individuals capable of leading an independent country, nor did it help the Irish establish a self-sufficient economy. As has been mentioned before, the Irish at this time did not possess an identity apart from Britain; hence they remained unoriginal and unlettered. Britain's manipulation of Irish national education helped create these conditions. Our look at New England education proves that a lack of restrictive and repressive control over education can over time produce the elements necessary for independent thinking and revolutionary movements.

Unfortunately, education in Ireland took a much different course than that of the American colonies. Due to repressive legislation and cultural influences, education in Ireland was slow to evolve and secularize. A symbiosis between the community and centers of learning did not develop on a wide scale, and education was not allowed to become fully integrated into the lives of the Irish. As a result Ireland was unable to develop the traits necessary to give the nation a fighting chance at independence. Education helped the American colonists sever economic, social, and political ties with Britain, as well as transcend religious differences to form a unified nationalistic identity,

⁸⁶ Jane Adams, quoted in *Eyewitness to 1798*, 42.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

while the lack of education in Ireland led the Irish to retain their strong connections to the English, hopelessly dividing the populace into numerous segments of society with varying shades of allegiance to the English Crown. Without a sizable polarized social class, Ireland waged a futile revolt for independence. Going back to the words of Cadwallader Colden, Ireland definitely was a poor nation, but its underdeveloped and over controlled system of education prevented it from becoming virtuous. As a result it was no match for England, the rich nation “abounding in silver and gold.”

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