

The American Revolution in Ireland: Franklin's Irish Front

by Matthew Ogden

On March 17, 1780, Gen. George Washington proclaimed that St. Patrick's Day would be a day of rest for the Continental Army, to celebrate the cause of Irish freedom and the Irish-American alliance against the British Empire. This testament to the solidarity between the Americans and the Irish, from the father of the United States, was an affirmation of that spirit of resistance which the peoples of those two nations had shared for well over a century before, and continue to share to the present day.

Introduction

Less than 100 years after the successful Andros Rebellion in the colony of Massachusetts Bay, in which 1,000 armed citizens deposed the royal governor and declared themselves an independent republican government, the spark of revolution was reignited with the shots first fired on Lexington Green. The conflict that was to ensue, would bring the British forces in the North American colonies to their knees, and result in the birth of the American Republic, the first permanent and lasting sovereign republic on the face of the globe.

However, just as the uprisings of 1689 against William of Orange's new Venetian Empire regime were not isolated struggles within separate localities,¹ but rather,

part of a simultaneous resistance against one global empire, so the American Revolution was merely one front in a globally extended war.

Simultaneous with the organized rebellion among the colonists in North America, a similar force was gathering strength on the island of Ireland, England's closest neighbor to the west.

Benjamin Franklin, along with other revolutionary leaders in the American colonies, saw the rising tide of revolution in the American colonies as not just an opportunity for the independence of a few isolated sovereign states in North America, but as the chance to destroy the British Empire in its global totality.

'Friends of America'

Because of the shared spirit of resistance, which both the citizens of Ireland and Massachusetts Bay had exhibited in opposition to William of Orange, Franklin, the direct protégé of Andros Rebellion leader Cotton Mather, saw the Irish as his most likely allies in a plan to launch a many-faceted uprising within the British colonies. Already, by the year 1769, he undertook a trip to Ireland to scout out the possibility for an alliance between the two countries. Reporting back to his fellow patriots in Massachusetts, Franklin wrote: "All Ireland is strongly in favor of the American cause. They have reason to sympathize with us."

Returning in 1771 to meet with the "principal patri-

1. See "Ireland and America versus the New Venetian Empire," at <http://www.larouchepac.com/node/17692> or in *EIR*, March 18, 2011.



Benjamin Franklin reported poverty in Ireland to rival, or be worse than that of black slavery in the United States during the mid-18th Century. While this painting (by F. Goodall, R.A., from the collection of Maggie Land Blanck) portrays an eviction in the mid-19th Century, its image could apply just as well to a century before.

ots” of the country, Franklin was received in Dublin with great enthusiasm. He reported that he had found the Irish patriotic leaders whom he had met with from among the Irish National party, “to be friends of America, in which I endeavored to confirm them, with the expectation that our growing weight might in time be thrown into their scale, and, by joining our interests with others, a more equitable treatment from the English might be obtained for them as well as for us.”

As news was coming in from India of the starvation of 10 million people in less than one year, because of the policies of the British East India Company there, the horror of the fate which awaited the American colonies, were they not to resist, was only magnified in Franklin’s eyes by what he saw in Ireland. Since the time that William of Orange had forcibly crushed the independent Irish Patriot Parliament, the Irish people had been targeted for complete elimination, being systematically dispossessed of their land, and driven into a state of desperate poverty. By the 1770s, almost 95% of the arable land on the island was owned by absentee landlords, to whom the Irish peasants, who were overwhelmingly Catholic, were effectively enslaved due to the anti-Catholic penal laws. The conditions under which the Irish lived were so wretched, that eyewitnesses reported that even the black slaves in the British colonies in the Caribbean lived better than the majority

of the Irish people.

After almost six centuries of British rule, the Irish people were faced with the possibility of total extinction. Franklin described the brutal conditions of life which he observed among both the Irish and Scottish people:

“I have lately made a tour through Ireland and Scotland. In these Countries, a small part of the Society are Landlords, great Noblemen and Gentlemen, extremely opulent, living in the highest Affluence and Magnificence: the Bulk of the People Tenants, extremely poor, living in the most sordid Wretchedness in dirty Hovels of Mud and Straw, and clothed only in Rags. I thought often of the Happiness of New England, where every Man is a Freeholder, has a Vote in publick Affairs, lives in a

tidy warm House, has plenty of good Food and Fuel, with whole Cloaths from Head to Foot, the Manufactory perhaps of his own Family. Long may they continue in this Situation!” (Franklin to J. Babcock, January 1772)

By the time the Revolution broke out in Massachusetts in 1775, the North American colonies had already been flooded with Irish men and women (many of whom called themselves Scots-Irish), seeking to escape these savage conditions of life which the British had imposed upon them at home. And when they arrived, they bore the scars of generations of war which the British had waged against them. As soon as the drums of war began to beat, and the patriot militias began to assemble, the Irish immigrants flocked to enlist, ready to fight. On the morning of April 19, an estimated 150 of the Minutemen who assembled to face the Redcoats at Lexington and Concord were Irishmen, newly arrived on the shores of North America. By the height of the war, an incredibly large portion of Washington’s army, including his officer corps, was Irish, either by birth or by descent.

The Irish Front Is Opened

Once the fighting broke out and the hot phase of the war in North America had begun, Franklin immediately put his plan for a simultaneous revolt by all of the Brit-



The chief strategist of the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin, constantly sought to bring Ireland into the war against the Empire, through both private and public diplomacy.

ish colonies into action. Meeting with the Continental Congress in 1775, a year before independence was officially declared, Franklin submitted a proposal for the drafting of articles for a united confederation among the still separate North American colonies. The final article in the proposed document would extend an invitation to the other British colonies, including Ireland, to enter into the confederated alliance. The article reads:

“Any and every Colony from Great Britain upon the Continent of North America and not at present engaged in our Association may upon Application and joining the said Association be received into this Confederation, viz. Ireland, the West India Islands, Quebec, St. Johns, Nova Scotia, Bermudas, and the East and West Floridas; and shall thereupon be entitled to all the Advantages of our Union, mutual Assistance and Commerce” (proposed Articles for Confederation and Perpetual Union, Article XIII, 1775).

The same Continental Congress adopted an address to the Irish, written by Franklin, which distinguished the Irish Parliament from that of the British, against whom the Americans had declared war:

“Your Parliament had done us no wrong. You had ever been friendly to the rights of mankind; and we ac-

knowledge with pleasure and gratitude, that your nation has produced patriots, who have nobly distinguished themselves in the cause of humanity and America. Accept our most grateful acknowledgments for the friendly disposition you have always shown us. We know that you are not without your grievances... In the rich pastures of Ireland many hungry parricides have fed, and grown strong to labor in its destruction. We hope the patient abiding of the meek may not always be forgotten; and God grant that the iniquitous schemes of extirpating liberty by the British Empire may soon be defeated.’”

As the fighting spread from Massachusetts to the other colonies in North America, drawing increasing numbers of British troops into the attempt to put down the revolt there, Franklin began to mobilize a parallel uprising among the Irish, emphasizing to his allies among the Irish patriotic leaders that now was their strategic chance to achieve independence. The British would not be able to contend with two rebellions at once, he argued, and a common military action by both countries would be more than the empire could handle.

An Irish citizens’ army began to be built up, under the pretext of protecting Ireland from a foreign invasion, while the increasing numbers of British regulars were shipped to America to quell the uprising there. However, this citizens’ militia—the “Irish Volunteers” as they were called—refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the King, or to accept royal commissions for their officers. By May 1779, the Irish Volunteers numbered more than 8,000, outnumbering the British forces by greater than two to one. By October of that year, their ranks had swollen to 50,000, and by the end of 1779, almost to 100,000 men in arms.

‘That Infamous Franklin’

The support for this patriotic movement by the revolutionary leadership in America was announced by Franklin in an open letter which he sent from France in October 1778, called “An Address to the Good People of Ireland on Behalf of America.” Franklin wrote:

“The misery and distress which your ill-fated country has been so frequently exposed to, and has so often experienced, by such a combination of rapine, treachery and violence, as would have disgraced the name of government in the most arbitrary country in the world, has most sincerely affected your friends in America, and has engaged the most serious attention of Congress.”

Franklin concluded, speaking on behalf of the Continental Congress, by committing the newly proclaimed independent American states to an economic and political alliance with Ireland, in direct opposition to Great Britain:

“If the government, whom you at this time acknowledge, does not, in conformity with her own true interest, take off and remove every restraint on your trade, commerce and manufactures, I am charged to assure you, that means will be found to establish your freedom in this respect, in the fullest and amplest manner. And as it is the ardent wish of America to promote, as far as her other engagements will permit, a reciprocal commercial interest with you, I am to assure you, they will seek

every means to establish and extend it; and it has given the most sensible pleasure to have those instructions committed to my care, as I have ever retained the most perfect good will and esteem for the people of Ireland.”

Franklin continued to nurture the growth of the citizens’ army in Ireland, sending dispatches to the Irish which were printed in various patriot newspapers there, announcing news of the successes by the less experienced and lesser equipped Continental Army in America against the highly trained British forces, and emphasizing Ireland’s common interest in America’s quest for independence. The American cause became exceedingly popular. As Britain’s Lord Shelburne observed, “In every Protestant or Dissenter’s house the established toast is success to the Americans.” Other eyewitnesses reported that the people talk sedition and speak of treason everywhere, warning the British government that the Irish would follow America step by step, until the entire British Empire was undone.

As France, and then Spain, joined forces on the side of the Americans following the surrender of Gen. John Burgoyne at Saratoga, the British were beginning to feel the heat of the possibility of a multi-front war. It was widely recognized among British intelligence officials that Franklin and other revolutionary leaders, in-



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While the American population was fighting the British Empire across the Atlantic, the Irish too were mustering an army under the name of the Irish Volunteers. By 1779, the Irish had over 100,000 men in arms. Here, a painting of American soldiers in battle.

cluding the naval captain John Paul Jones, were seriously considering the idea of bringing the war to British shores, possibly launching a direct offensive against Britain itself. In France, General Lafayette was interviewing Franklin’s Irish contacts and collaborators about the possibility of a joint American-French invasion of the British Isles from the shores of Ireland. Among Franklin’s circles in France at the time was a young printer’s apprentice named Mathew Carey, who had been forced to flee Ireland for the writing and publishing of pamphlets calling for repeal of the brutal anti-Catholic Penal Laws. Lafayette asked Carey to tell him in what ways the Irish were organized politically, and how many could be depended on to join in an insurrection if France were to land in Ireland.

Aware of Franklin and Lafayette’s agitations, Lord Stormont, the British Secretary of State, wrote to the King telling him that Franklin was involved in an attempt to gain French assistance to help establish an independent kingdom of Ireland. And Viscount Hillsborough, another agent for the British Foreign Office in Ireland, wrote: “Your cursed Volunteers, and Patriots have alarmed us here very much... That infamous Franklin by his agents is certainly attempting mischief in Ireland.”

The Irish Sons of Liberty

In parallel with the Sons of Liberty in America, the Irish Volunteers waged a trade war against the British, adopting and enforcing the proven method of non-consumption and non-importation. This boycott movement spread all over the country, with nationalist associations adopting resolutions swearing to wear and make use of the manufactures of Ireland only. Merchants who imported English goods were threatened by the Volunteers and warned of the consequences if they continued. Some were made examples of, through tarring and feathering, and other forms of public humiliation.

The young Mathew Carey, under the sponsorship of Franklin and Lafayette, now back in Ireland, first became the editor of the *Freeman's Journal*, which published regular reports on the progress of the American war. He then began to publish a newspaper called the *Volunteer's Journal*, which quickly became the most widely read newspaper on the island. It was the flagship publication and the organizing instrument of the entire Irish Volunteers association. Writing such articles as "Unite or Perish." Carey became the voice of republicanism in Ireland, advocating separation from England, protective tariffs for the defense of the Irish textile industry, full religious and civil liberty for Catholics, Protestants, and Dissenters, and a total reform of the parliamentary and electoral system of Ireland. He provided extensive coverage of affairs in America, printing letters and reports from Irish soldiers in the Continental Army, and continually praising George Washington as the man whom Irish patriots should emulate. Mathew Carey was Benjamin Franklin's primary channel for the organization and education of the "Sons of Liberty" in Ireland.

The success of the non-importation movement put the leaders of the Volunteers in the position to demand the lifting of the repressive restrictions on Irish trade, which had crippled and impoverished Ireland's econ-



Franklin's leading republican agent in Ireland was Mathew Carey, a printer who was constantly in trouble with the ruling authorities; he emigrated to the United States, where he played an indispensable role in developing the nation.

omy since the Navigation Acts of 1663. As the demands were argued for by the leader of the Irish Patriot Party, Henry Grattan, in the Parliament in Dublin, the Irish Volunteers gathered outside, with their cannons pointed at the Parliament house and placards hung over the barrels, which threateningly demanded the lifting of trade restrictions "or else." This eloquent argument from the armed volunteers surrounding the Parliament was very convincing, to say the least, and the British government, under pressure also from America, immediately conceded, voting to lift all of the embargoes and trade restrictions which had been imposed on Ireland.

This victory served to swell the ranks of the Irish volunteers still further. Demonstrations were held in Dublin on Nov. 4, the day commemorating the 1690 Battle of the Boyne, during Ireland's war against William of Orange, with the Volunteers turning out in full uniform and arms, and surrounding the statue of Britain's King William III in Dublin, covering it in posters and signs demanding independence for Ireland—thus showing the continuity of resistance stretching back to 1688.

Independence Is Won

News continued to come in from Franklin of the successes of the American forces. The strategy of the Irish leaders was to use the growing numbers of armed Volunteers to keep up the pressure on the British occupation army in Ireland, and use the threat of military action to force concessions from London for legislative independence for Ireland.

Among these demands were the repeal of Poyning's Act of 1495, which said that the Irish Parliament was only permitted to discuss bills which had been first approved by the English King, and the repeal of the Declaratory Act, which had been imposed in 1719, declaring that laws made by the English King had the full power and authority to bind the people of Ire-

land. The Irish Volunteers, whose numbers had by this time grown to almost 300,000, convened a National Convention, and drafted resolutions demanding the repeal of both Poyning's Act and the Declaratory Act, and calling for the establishment of an independent and sovereign Parliament by and for the people of Ireland.

Finally, as the news came in that Gen. Charles Cornwallis had surrendered to George Washington at Yorktown, the King reluctantly agreed to meet with Grattan, who presented these demands. The English Parliament officially repealed the Declaratory Act in 1782, and finally, in 1783, the same year as the Treaty of Paris, which recognized the independence of the United States of America, the British Parliament passed the Renunciation Act, which formally abandoned British rule of Ireland.

Almost immediately, Ireland's newly independent legislature enacted protective tariffs, made credit available for manufactures, and began work on canals and other national infrastructure. State control over the grain market was established to protect the farmers, a national postal system was established, and all restrictions on Catholic landholding were repealed.

The Renunciation Act recognized "the right claim by the people of Ireland to be bound only by laws enacted by His Majesty and the Parliament of that Kingdom in all cases whatever ... [this] shall be and is hereby declared to be established and ascertained for ever, and shall at no time hereafter be questioned or questionable."

Although the British would immediately begin to reveal the utter hypocrisy of their promise, with the new prime minister, William Pitt the Younger, working tirelessly for the next 20 years to revoke Irish independence and force Ireland back into the empire, which he finally succeeded in doing with the infamous 1801 Act of Union, it is clear that Benjamin Franklin's strategy for a many-fronted offensive against the British had been successful, and that its decisive success in America had depended, in large degree, on the parallel and sympa-



Irish Patriot Party head Henry Grattan negotiated the formal abandonment of British rule over Ireland, with King George, after the U.S. victory at Yorktown in 1781. The British Empire eventually succeeded in revoking that independence.

thetic revolution waged by Irish patriots. As George Washington was to write in August 1783 upon hearing of this news, celebrating the double victory of both Ireland and the United States:

"Your Congratulations to our happy-fated Country are very agreeable, and your Expressions of personal Regard for me, claim my sincerest Thanks, as do your Exertions in favor of our righteous Cause, now so happily terminated. . . . And while I thus express my Wishes in favor of my Native Country, I would felicitate the Kingdom of Ireland on their Emancipation from British Con-
troul, and extend my pious Entreaties, that Heaven may establish them in a happy and perpetuated Tranquility, enjoying a freedom of Legislation, and an unconfined Extension of Trade,

that connecting Link, which binds together the remotest Countries."

Moving Forward

The alliance between the republican leaders of the United States and the patriots of Ireland continued, through the networks of Franklin's young protégé Mathew Carey—who eventually was forced by the British to flee for his life from Ireland to Philadelphia—and then through his son Henry C. Carey. The economic principles which the Careys would develop as what became known as the American System, were the model upon which Arthur Griffith, the father of modern Ireland, would found his movement for Irish independence, Sinn Féin.

It was the Renunciation Act of 1783, the outcome of the successful Irish front in the American-led war for national independence, which Griffith would make the central feature of Sinn Féin and his fight for a new independent Ireland. He argued that Ireland, since 1783, was lawfully an independent and sovereign state; that the pathway to reclaiming that independence was to reject Pitt's 1801 Act of Union by simply not recognizing it; that the elected representatives of the Irish people

must abstain from the Westminster Parliament and set up what would become the sovereign Dáil Éireann in Dublin; and, in this way, to restore the independent constitutional state which had been won with Washington's victory over Cornwallis.

Griffith wrote: "[I]t is to be recollected that the Parliament of Ireland at this period was no shadow of a Legislature. It was a sovereign assembly, with the power of establishing and maintaining its own army and fleet, with the power of making war and concluding peace, with absolute fiscal powers and right of concluding commercial treaties with any nation. It was as independent of the British Parliament as the Congress of the United States is today. It was the Parliament of an independent nation." (From "Pitt's Policy: Imperialism and Ireland," 1911)

And this independent nation, which, under the strategic guidance of Franklin and Washington, had come into existence for a brief generation in the aftermath of the American Revolution, was the image which Griffith, with the founding of Sinn Féin, again brought before the imaginations of the Irish people as their historic birthright as a free and sovereign people. It was this

idea of an independent Irish state, freed from the political and economic shackles of the British Empire, in the image of the sovereign American Republic, for which the Irish people were roused to fight in their revolution of 1919-21, and which they continue to fight to preserve today.

So, as we in the United States find ourselves still in solidarity with the Irish people in our continuing war against our common foe, let us recall the words of Gen. George Washington, which he uttered over two centuries ago, in January 1784, but which still ring true to this day:

"The generous indignation against the foes to the rights of human Nature, with which you seem to be animated; and the exalted sentiments of Liberty, which you appear to entertain; are too consonant to the feelings and principles of the Citizens of the United States of America, not to attract their veneration and esteem. . . . If in the course of our successful contest, any good consequences have resulted to the oppressed Kingdom of Ireland, it will afford a new source of felicitation to all who respect the interests of humanity."

Lyndon LaRouche On Glass-Steagall and NAWAPA

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