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State of Ireland during the Eighteenth Century

Taken from *The British Empire in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapter V.) by Edgar Sanderson (1898)

Penal laws against the Roman Catholics—Restrictions upon Irish industries and trade—The Irish Parliament—Flood and Grattan—Convention of Dungannon—"Whiteboys" and "United Irishmen"—Formation of "Orange" lodges—Cruelties practised on the Roman Catholics—Irish rebellion of 1798—Act for union with Great Britain passed.

For nearly a century after the last conquest of Ireland, under William the Third, that unhappy country was quiescent with the apathy of exhaustion, misery, and despair. In Elizabeth's reign the native Celts had been hunted like wild beasts: their faith had been proscribed; their lands had been largely confiscated. Great further land robberies were perpetrated in the days of James the First, his son Charles, Cromwell, and William the Third. In one quarter alone, Ulster, the Protestant "plantation" of Scottish and English settlers, formed by James the First, was there any real prosperity.

After the surrender of Limerick in 1691, the treaty which promised religious freedom to the Catholics was grossly violated, and they were made subject to the action of severe "penal laws", passed in the Irish parliament, an assembly composed of Protestant lords, and of members returned for boroughs controlled by the crown or by patrons or by close corporations, and for counties dominated in election affairs by great proprietors of land. Catholics were not permitted to keep school; to go beyond seas, or to send others thither for education in the Romish religion. Intermarriage with Protestants was disallowed, in case of the possession of an estate in Ireland. Children of mixed marriages were always to be brought up in the Protestant faith.

A "Papist" could not be guardian to any child, nor hold land, nor possess arms. He could not hold a commission in the army or navy, or be a private soldier. No Catholic could hold any office of honour or emolument in the state, or be a member of any corporation, or vote for members of the Commons, or, if he were a peer, sit or vote in the Lords. Almost all these personal disabilities were equally enforced by law against any Protestant who married a Catholic wife. It was a felony, with transportation, to teach the Catholic religion, and treason, as a capital offence, to convert a Protestant to the Catholic faith. The legislation devised for the Irish Catholics in that evil time was described by Burke as "a machine as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment, and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man".

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Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger is an American widow's account of her travels in Ireland in 1844-45 on the eve of the Great Famine. Sailing from New York, she set out to determine the condition of the Irish poor and discover why so many were emigrating to her home country. Mrs Nicholson's recollections of her tour among the peasantry are still revealing and gripping today. The author returned to Ireland in 1847-49 to help with famine relief and recorded those experiences in the rather harrowing *Annals of the Famine in Ireland!*



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The legislation against Irish industries had its origin in the narrow and selfish spirit of commercial monopoly in England which had devised the Navigation Acts against the carrying trade of the Dutch, and was displayed by her in commercial dealings with her "plantations" and colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Irish manufactures and trade were openly suppressed and extirpated. In the reign of Charles the Second, Irish land was chiefly used for pasture, and Irish wealth was derived from the export of cattle, meat, butter and cheese to western English ports. The English landowners complained, and laws of 1665 and 1680 prohibited the importation of all this Irish produce into England. Her trade with the colonies was ruined by legislation which forbade exports thither save in English ships, or imports thence except with first unloading in English harbours.

When the Irish landowners were prevented from exporting their cattle to England, they raised large flocks of sheep and began a manufacture in wool. English jealousy was again aroused, and in 1699 Irish woollens were excluded from the English and all foreign markets. Thousands of workmen left Ulster for America and the Continent, and the country was once more reduced to penury, when the people were thrown for sustenance entirely upon the land. The linens of Ireland, and some manufactures in cotton, were also shut out from the English markets by heavy duties. The trade in beer and malt was heavily taxed, and, under George the Second, severe restrictions were laid on Irish manufactures in glass, paper, velvet, hats, and other articles. The breaking up of land from pasture into arable was restricted by legislation, and disastrous famines arose from time to time in the failure to grow sufficient corn.

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