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# A BACKDROP TO HEANEY: AN OUTLINE OF IRISH POLITICAL HISTORY

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WHenever an author is to be studied in some depth, an understanding of his formative influences is always important, and must necessarily be obtained before the poetry is actually evaluated. It would be, to take a somewhat extreme example, quite difficult to obtain a proper response to Chaucer's poetry unless the medieval mind and the medieval world are first understood.

With a poet like Seamus Heaney who uses English as his linguistic vehicle, but whose subjects, expression, and feelings are Irish, it becomes essential to understand his received culture and the mentality generated by his ethnic origin. That which may, for convenience, be called his 'Irishness', has to be comprehended if his poems are, in many cases, to make any sense at all. The problem is by no means simple, for there are, in fact, two Irelands, and Heaney is very much the product of each one separately as he is of the rift that lies between them, of the centuries-old antagonisms that have riven Ireland asunder.

It is the present intention to provide a simplified and somewhat selective outline of Irish political history, and since Anglo-Irish strife has been a dominant feature and a shaping force of Irish history, all events prior to its origin shall be ignored; similarly literary influences, which may be traced back to Druidic times, may be tackled in a separate paper.

The Catholic religion, for good or ill, has for centuries been at the centre of Irish history. St Patrick had Christianized the Irish by AD 450 and the Irish Church grew and developed to such an extent that it became quite independent of Rome; the matter was regarded with some seriousness by Rome, and it took a high-level convocation (the Synod of Whitby) to settle the differences. The Irish monasteries became centres of learning, and Irish missionaries assumed, quite successfully, the difficult task of converting the dour Scots.

Ironically, it was the head of the Church of Rome who sowed the seeds of a tragic division eight hundred years ago. For the first and only time, the head of the Roman Church was an Englishman, Nicholas Breakspear.

He assumed the name of Adrian IV, and his papacy lasted from 1154 to 1159; for the present intentions, his most significant act was the formal proclamation of Henry II of England as the Lord of Ireland. The excuse for this stratagem (for so it must be considered) was that the Irish were ignorant of true Christian doctrine and needed the religious tutelage of the Catholic Henry. Henry had always desired an expansion of his rule and it is clear that in his proclamation Adrian was acceding to 'his' king's request. No other Pope would probably have considered, much less sanctioned, such a request, since it was patently clear that the Irish Church was one of the best organized in the Northern world.

To Henry, of course, 'religious tutelage' was of no consequence. He regarded Ireland as a political acquisition, an extension of his power. The Irish realized this and were unwilling to submit to such an imposition. Henry sent the Earl of Pembroke, known as Richard Strongbow, to take possession in his name, but, some time after he had actually done so, Richard married an Irish princess, the daughter of the King of Leinster, and, upon the death of her father, proclaimed himself King of Ireland.

Henry re-instated himself as the sole Lord of Ireland by means of an armed expedition led by himself, and the claims of all successive English kings to Ireland were based on this settlement.

After quelling Pembroke's rebellion, Henry parcelled out the land among various Anglo-Norman barons, little knowing that they would present the next threat. The descendants of these Normans allied themselves with the Irish and attempted to secede from England and establish an independent Irish Crown. Their opposition gradually waned until it was confined to Dublin and its immediate surroundings, which became known as 'The Pale'. Dublin was to retain for centuries its characteristic as a centre of opposition to the British presence.

The turbulent reign of Henry VIII, so full of dramatic contrasts, could hardly have failed to influence Irish history. Henry felt that stricter control over Ireland could be exercised gradually, perhaps painlessly and imperceptibly, by a system of colonization, but he was only moderately successful in this since Irish soil was less fertile than the English one and did not constitute an incentive to farmers. Henry showed great tact and diplomacy when he accepted in all districts (except the Pale) the application of Irish law in lieu of the English one. The beneficial effects of this were nullified, however, when he dissolved all the monasteries by force and attempted violently to suppress Catholicism. He sowed the seeds of dissent that would germinate into open rebellion during the reign of Elizabeth I, his daughter.

Rather than giving way, Elizabeth displayed her typical temper when she countered by imposing the Anglican Faith on Ireland.

Quite predictably, this had the effect of making the Irish more staunchly Catholic, because it is often the case that imposition awakens the human tendency to perversity. It should be pointed out, moreover, that by then Catholicism and Protestantism had achieved a degraded political significance; they became identifiers of political allegiance. The relatively new element of a different Faith made the Irish hate the English not only as invaders but also as heretics, and, conversely, the English had exchanged their previous scorn of the Irish for an actual detestation, since Ireland came to represent, on England's very doorstep, all that the hated but distant Spain stood for.

During the reigns of the early Stuarts things noticeably worsened. Any Irish landlord who demonstrated disaffection had his lands confiscated by the Crown. A policy of colonization was again put into effect, this time by Scottish farmers, who were more willing than their English counterparts since Scottish soil is difficult.

From this period onward Ireland became a country of constant, almost uninterrupted, rebellion. In 1641 a great rebellion broke out against the Earl of Strafford's rule, and many thousands of Protestants perished. In 1649 the Civil War in England had come to its bloody end with the execution of Charles I, and Cromwell could now devote his stern attention to Ireland. His New Model Army had finished its task in England and was sent to quell the French-aided rebellion in the sister island, where Charles II had sought refuge and had been hailed and recognized as King. The New Model Army crushed the rebellion with some ease and great cruelty.

The Irish were up in arms again in 1688, and again they were crushed, this time in 1690, by John Churchill, the Earl of Marlborough, in the Battle of the Boyne. The Irish leader, Sarsfield, escaped to France, where he founded the famous Irish Brigades. After 1690 the infamous 'Penal Code' was enforced; this was a blanket name for a number of vindictive anti-Catholic laws. This caused much disaffection, as did the fact that most of the landowners resided in England (some of 'them' were actually commercial companies!) and therefore managed their estates by means of representatives who were often insensitive and brutal. Trade restrictions imposed by the British Crown certainly increased their rancour.

The establishment of the American nation as an independent political entity had an ambiguous effect on Irish affairs. When, in 1782, the British troops on Irish soil were sent to fight in the War of American Independence, Ireland was left unguarded even whilst a French invasion was being

feared. The Irish rallied to the national cause, and Protestant and Catholic joined together under the leadership of Henry Grattan; the formidable force thus created deterred the French, gave an evanescent vision of unity to the Irish, and demonstrated to themselves their potential. Possibly to restore the compliment, England withdrew the Trade Restrictions. In spite of this, there was again rebellion by 1798, and the Irish Catholics were soundly beaten at the Battles of New Ross and Vinegar Hill.

England rode the unbroken Irish horse precariously. Neither colonization nor repressive legislation nor even brute force had broken the determination of the Irish Catholics to achieve or retain what they considered to be their rights. By 1800 William Pitt, the British Prime Minister, had come to believe that an Act of Union between England and Ireland could end the anarchy. Pitt actually managed to achieve this, and in 1801 the Act of Union was passed, and became law, but it cost Pitt the premiership. In his dealings with the Irish, he had pledged his word that the Union would be accompanied by a Catholic emancipation. George III refused to include this in the Act, and Pitt had no possibility of retaining his position.

It was, in fact, twenty-eight years later, in 1829, that Catholics were allowed to sit in the House of Commons.

Ireland's woes were by no means over, however. In 1846, after a number of failed potato crops, a great famine struck the population. Thousands died and thousands emigrated, and Irish agriculture had to evolve. Yet the potato crop failure was only the most dramatic and obvious of Ireland's ills. If America, through the War of Independence, had unknowingly given Ireland a temporary sense of unity, it was, in the nineteenth century, to pose a grave threat to the Island because of its growing agricultural strength. Serious competition was being offered in the corn market and, when Britain adopted Free Trade, Ireland's loss of protection in the wheat market made it actually impossible to compete with America. These two economic factors, together with the potato famine, forced Irish agriculture to change from tillage to pasturage. This metamorphosis was not completed before 1914, and this fact shows the magnitude of the problem and underlines the essential hardiness and resilience of the Irish, in their ability to face turbulent change.

Gladstone, the British Prime Minister, tried twice, in 1886 and 1893, to pass Home Rule Bills for Ireland, but was unsuccessful. He believed that only through Home Rule could the growing wave of unrest be quelled. Charles Parnell, the Irish Leader, organized and consolidated the Irish Home Rule Party and this caused 'The Irish Question' to dominate affairs at Westminster for several years. It was at this time that an intense national

feeling caused a revival of the Irish National tongue, Gaelic, with the result that thousands of adults started to learning, for the first time in their lives, their native language.

Although considerable social and economic reforms took place around the turn of the century, the intense nationalistic passions then current could hardly be appeased by anything short of Home Rule, and indeed this was finally granted by the Liberal Party under Lord Asquith in 1914. Royal Assent was given, but the actual operation of the Act was suspended because of the outbreak of the First World War. Although many Irishmen volunteered and fought for Great Britain and indeed the Irish Parliamentary Party, led by John Redmond, assisted the British cause, bitterness remained intense between the two countries. In 1916, in Dublin, an organization known as *Sinn Fein* (lit. 'We Ourselves') raised an armed rebellion which came to be known as 'The Easter Rising'. Fifteen *Sinn Fein* leaders were executed, but this, as usual, endowed them with the aura of martyrdom, and made *Sinn Fein* more popular. As a result, political influence slipped from the Parliamentary Party's hands to the *Sinn Fein*, especially after John Redmond's death.

In December 1918, the Irish representatives who had been returned in the general election constituted a parliament in Dublin, called the *Dáil Eirann*, and affirmed the independence of the country. Certain factions of the *Sinn Fein* were not satisfied with this, however, and started a bitter guerilla war against the forces of the Crown. Three years later this struggle came to an end by a truce. It was also in 1921 that the six counties of North Eastern Ireland established a separate Parliament. On 6 December 1921, a treaty was signed and dominion status was accepted for the other 26 counties; the *Saorstát Eirann*, or Irish Free State, was thus established. The partitioning of a single island into two separate states with conflicting ideologies, aspirations, and religious denominations had become a political reality. Antagonism now had identifiable geographical locations, and Ireland became as neat a theatre of strife as a boxing ring, with the two pugilists facing each other from their corners. It would be tempting to think that this partitioning was an application of the British policy of *divide et impera* (divide and rule) but it is probably more accurate to consider it as a sign of failure on the part of Britain to anglicize the Irish or subdue them, as an acceptance of the fact that the majority of the Irish had a clearly-defined and understood concept of national identity. By conceding a separate Parliament of the Northern Counties, England had, however, conserved her interests.

The *Finn Gael*, or Pro-Treaty Party, remained in government until

February 1932, when the *Fianna Fail*, or Republican Party, led by Eamonn de Valéra secured a majority. De Valéra's dream was the achievement of a complete independence, and the jettisoning of dominion status, which was considered humiliating. In 1937 De Valéra announced the adoption of a new constitution which declared Ireland a sovereign and independent state, a republic. In 1939, when at least a continental war seemed unavoidable, the Republic of Ireland declared itself neutral, thereby possibly scandalizing British sentiment. Many British people felt that this was an act of betrayal in time of need, and in fact there were several rumours, throughout the war, which cast doubts on Ireland's strict observance of its neutral status. Some rumours may have had an element of truth, since an Irishman by the name of William Joyce (more popularly known as 'Lord Haw-Haw') was executed for broadcasting morale-sapping propaganda from Nazi Germany. British mistrust of the Irish is also portrayed in contemporary fiction, and a somewhat recent 'best-seller' by Jack Higgins, called *The Eagle Has Landed*, portrays an Irishman acting as a Nazi secret agent who prepares the way for a squad of German parachutists sent clandestinely to Britain in order to assassinate Churchill. The prevailing mentality made it all a plausible myth.

The average Republican's aversion of the Northern Unionists has, since 1913, found violent expression in the I.R.A., short for Irish Republican Army. The I.R.A., which in fact does not form part of the Republic's armed forces and is a clandestine, or underground force, aims at the extension of the Republic to the Northern Counties, and has tried to achieve this by means of terror-bombing campaigns in Northern Ireland and Britain. The northern counties had shown their loyalty to Britain during the Second World War by joining the Commonwealth forces, and indeed many of the leading military figures, such as Alanbrooke, Alexander, and Auchinleck, came from Ulster.

By means of its terrorist attacks the I.R.A. has tried to ensure that the northern counties find it hard to settle down and prosper. Conversely, the northern Protestants have not been lagging in violent reactions. When, in 1965, the Northern Irish and Republican premiers met in Belfast (N.I.) for the first time, Protestant militants led by the Reverend Ian Paisley caused several disturbances. The 1960s were, in fact, marked by constant clashes in Northern Ireland between militant Protestants and Catholics campaigning for Civil Rights. British troops were called into Northern Ireland in 1969 and Bernadette Devlin, a Civil Rights leader, was imprisoned in that same year. Perhaps as a sign of good-will, the British managed to disband the feared and hated B-Special Volunteer Constabulary, which was largely

Protestant, but rioting and street-fighting took place intermittently in 1970. 1971 was even worse, with the I.R.A. increasing its terrorist activity and with several deaths in riots. The murder of three young British soldiers in a public house caused a political storm which resulted in a change of premiership.

An escalation of violence in 1972 brought about the prorogement of the Parliament of Northern Ireland and an Act was passed on 30 March 1972, by which Westminster transferred all legislative and executive powers to a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. In 1974 the idea of setting up an Assembly which would involve the Republic as well was promoted by the British Labour Party. The Council was established in January, but in the February U.K. General Elections, eleven out of twelve seats were won by candidates opposed to the Northern Ireland Executive; the Executive in fact resigned in May 1974, and direct rule was resumed. It should be pointed out that 'direct rule' means that Northern Ireland was again governed by the British Secretary of State. From here on we have been witnesses of the bloody struggle: we have read about the events, and we have even seen some of them on the television screen.

Some of these events are fresh and almost indelible in the sense of shock they generated, such as the Earl Mountbatten of Burma's assassination in 1979, or the bomb explosions in Hyde Park and Regent's Park on 20 July 1982 which killed eleven and injured fifty.

Northern Ireland remains the bone of contention. It is, to-day, a cauldron of conflicting and generally irreconcilable sentiments; whilst the Republic is more homogeneously Catholic, the six northern Irish counties retain the ancient mosaic of hatreds and passions. It is as if all the traditional violence of Irish history has concentrated and coagulated in the North, the last toe-hold of British presence.

Irish History is, unfortunately, a chronicle of blood. A mere head-count of all those who died in riots, who fell to assassination squads or who were blown to bits since the end of the war would simply sicken compiler and reader. If history were a holy thing, Ireland would be one of its chalices.

It would have been beyond the present intentions to go into greater detail, or to evaluate minutiae, important though they are. It is hoped that the tracing of an ancient strife, an ancient suffering, and an ancient dream may help in the understanding of the poetry of such an important contemporary as Seamus Heaney, Irishman.