

Lesson 1 – A Brief History of Dublin (and a bit of Ireland as a whole)

- **Pre-9th Century:** Two settlements
- **9th-11th Centuries:** Vikings invade, settle
- **12th Century:** Anglo-Norman invasion, Dublin Castle built
- **16th Century:** The Church of Ireland, “Plantation,” and Penal Laws
- **17th Century:** The Williamite War and the Protestant Ascendancy
- **18th Century:** The Atlantic slave trade, two major building booms, Catholic Emancipation begins
- **19th Century:** Act of Union unites Ireland with Great Britain, Catholic Emancipation is completed

Pre-9th Century

Historians can’t seem to come to any definitive conclusion about Dublin’s origins, but the prevailing theory is that there were two settlements (“proto-towns”) on the site where the city is now. One was a secular settlement called Áth Cliath and the other was an enclosed ecclesiastical settlement called Dubhlinn.

It’s important to note that the Romans never made it to Ireland, so there were no Roman settlements, roads, customs, etc. Christian missionaries did arrive on the island in about the 5th century and had contact with Romans in Britain, but the Romans themselves never conquered any part of Ireland.

9-11th Centuries

The two “proto-towns” were important enough to draw the attention of raiding Vikings, who set up a base there to raid from. By 917, they’d turned Áth Cliath into a trading center on the bank of the River Liffey. A hundred or so years later, the town had grown to include the forerunners of The Castle, Christ Church, and a couple of main roads that are still used today (all of which we’ll talk about in later lessons).

12th Century

This is where the Anglo-Normans come in. *Anglo* as in “from England” and *Norman* as in “the descendants of William the Conqueror’s lot.” In 1170, the deposed king of Leinster (which included that part of Dublin south of the River Liffey), Dermot MacMurragh, asked for help regaining his crown. Richard “Strongbow” de Clare, Earl of Pembroke (the guy for whom Strongbow Cider is named) obliged and led a mercenary force into Leinster. Strongbow helped MacMurragh regain his position, then married MacMurragh’s daughter, Aoife, and brought her back to England. Waves of other Anglo-Normans came (to Ireland in general, and Dublin in particular) and when John became King of England, he had Dublin Castle built and made it the center of his power in Ireland.

16th Century

Henry VIII had himself declared the head of the Church of England in 1534—and its equivalent, the Church of Ireland—then got the Irish Parliament to declare him King of Ireland in 1541. With this declaration came the policy of “plantation,” the settlement of Ireland by English and Scottish Protestants. This was most successful in Ulster (in the northern part of Ireland)—if you’ve ever heard the term “Ulster Scots,” this is where it came from. This period is also where sectarian conflict becomes a common theme (as we’ll talk about in later lessons), with a Protestant ruling class, Protestant settlers, while the majority of Ireland’s native population were practicing Catholics.

17th Century

In 1685, James II became king of England, Scotland, and Ireland—the first Catholic monarch since Mary I. In June 1688, seven Protestant aristocrats sent an invitation to William, Prince of Orange (who was married to James’s oldest daughter, Mary, a Protestant) to come to England with his army. William did just that in November 1688, thus kicking off the Glorious Revolution and replacing his father-in-law/uncle as King of England and Scotland (ruling jointly with his wife). James fled to France, borrowed some money and soldiers from his cousin, Louis XIV, and sailed to Ireland to fight for his crown.

Why Ireland? The English and Scottish Parliaments had declared that James had abdicated his throne, but the Parliament of Ireland—in Dublin—didn’t.

But the war didn’t go his way. In 1690, James fled Ireland for the last time and his army (the Jacobites) began a retreat across Ireland. The war officially ended in 1691 with the Treaty of Limerick and William was proclaimed King of Ireland. William appears to have been fairly tolerant of other religions, but his English supporters (including those who lived in Ireland) were not. In 1695, the Irish Parliament was called to Dublin, pointedly excluding Catholics and enacting new and broader Penal Laws (which we’ll discuss in more depth in Lesson 6) that restricted the political and civil rights of Catholics.

This began rise of what’s known as the Protestant Ascendancy—the Church of Ireland aristocrats who ruled Ireland from Dublin Castle. More on them in the next lesson.

18th Century

As James was losing his throne, the Atlantic slave trade was ramping up. The Royal African Company (later, the African Company of Merchants), originally chartered by Charles II as a company for trading along the west coast of Africa, began transporting slaves from Africa to various islands in the Caribbean Sea. Between 1662 and 1731, the RAC transported about 212,000 slaves, 44,000 of which died en route. Irish sailors worked on RAC slave ships, even captained a few. But more directly, it was Irish merchants and landowners who profited from the slave trade: cattle, crops, shoes, and other goods were cheaper to purchase in Ireland and ship to the Caribbean plantations from ports like Dublin, Belfast, and Cork. There are even instances of landowners removing their tenants to use the land for grazing cattle instead, because the cattle would bring in more money when sold on to the plantations than the tenants paid in rent.

Also during this century, Dublin experienced two separate building booms: the first in the 1740s, the second in the 1760, making it the second largest city in Britain and Ireland, behind only London. It was the center of government for the whole of Ireland, as well as an industrial and commercial center, and an international port. These sudden growth spurts of the city created a problem, though: people streamed in from the countryside looking for work and Dublin became crowded, making class divisions even more pronounced. Sectarian conflict did begin to ease a bit in the 1770s as the dismantling of the Penal Laws began, though historians disagree about whether or not attitudes toward Catholics actually changed. Based on the United Irishmen rebellion in 1798 and the government's reaction to it (which we'll talk about next week), I'd guess that there was little change in the everyday attitude toward Catholics at this point.

19th Century

The rebellion of 1798 and the possibility of a French invasion by Napoleon forced both the Irish and British parliaments to focus on Anglo-Hibernian relations. The idea of united Ireland with Great Britain had been bandied about for years, but it wasn't until 1800 that Dublin and Westminster both passed acts combining the two countries. They went into effect January 1, 1801, abolishing the Irish parliament. Ireland was thenceforth represented by 100 MPs in Westminster; Irish peers elected 28 of their own to sit in the Lords as representative peers for life.

During this time, the Penal Laws continued to be overturned, culminating in the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 which repealed the last remaining Penal Laws. This worked out best for upper and middle class Catholics, leaving poorer Catholics in much the same situation they'd always been in. The change in voter eligibility is a good example—the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 enfranchised anyone holding property worth at least £10. Those who didn't hold any property or who held property worth less, regardless of religious affiliation, did not get the right to vote.