A History of Ireland

The history of Ireland is long, complex, and shaped by centuries of conflict, colonisation, religious divisions, and political struggles.

In the beginning
Around 300BC, during the Iron Age, warriors called the Celts travelled to Ireland from Europe. Following the arrival of Saint Patrick and other Christian missionaries in the 5th century, Christianity replaced the indigenous pagan religion. In the 9th century, Vikings from Scandinavia invaded Britain and Ireland, and they gradually mixed with Irish society. The Vikings founded Dublin, Ireland's capital city, in the year 988.

Ireland Under British Rule
English involvement in Ireland began with the Norman invasion of Britain in the year 1169. They built many walled towns, castles and churches, and greatly advanced agriculture and commerce. By this time, the population of Ireland was mostly Catholic.

After King Henry VIII declared himself head of the Church of England (also called the Protestant Church) in 1534, he demanded that the Irish Parliament also declared him King of Ireland in 1541. In the 1600s, Britain sent Protestant colonists (mainly from Scotland and England) to live and work on land owned by native Irish Catholics. This event was known as "The Plantations". The Protestants confiscated the land and expelled the Catholics. The monarchy of Britain subsequently violently suppressed many Catholic uprisings. All this happened mostly in the north-east of the country, and would sow the seeds of later division.

Conflict and Control
The 17th century was violent. It saw the imposition of harsh 'penal laws' which disempowered Catholics, denying them the right to rent or own land, outlawing their clergy, forbidding them to attend higher education, blocking them from entering certain professions, and imposing oaths of conformity to the Protestant Church. During the 18th century, the penal laws were repealed, but by 1790, Catholics owned only about 5% of the land in the country. Inspired by the French Revolution, in 1791 an organisation called the "United Irishmen" was formed, with the ideal of bringing Irish people of all religions together to reform and reduce Britain's power in Ireland. The United Irishmen were the inspiration for an armed rebellion in 1798. The rebellion failed, and in 1801, the Act of Union was passed, uniting Ireland with Britain. In 1829, the "Act of Catholic Emancipation" was passed, and the ban on voting by Catholics was lifted. They could also become Members of the Parliament in London. After this success, it was attempted to establish an independent Irish parliament. However, this proved to be a difficult task.

The Great Famine
Potatoes were the staple food of Ireland at the time. When a plant disease affected the potato crops across the country in 1845, 1846 and 1847, disaster followed. Potatoes were inedible and people began to starve to death. The response of the British government also contributed to the disaster. Trade agreements were controlled by London and, while thousands of people were

suffering from extreme hunger, Ireland was forced to export abundant harvests of wheat and dairy products to England. Between 1845 and 1851, one million people died and another million emigrated to escape the famine. The population of Ireland has never reached its pre-famine level of about 8 million. Today, it is about 7 million, and emigration continues, with many Irish people moving to the USA.

Push for Irish Independence

Most of the Irish people (especially Catholics) wanted either "home rule" (self-government) or full independence. However, the Protestants in the north wanted to remain part of Britain, fearing domination by Catholic-majority Ireland. On April 24th 1916, armed rebels siezed Dublin and declared Ireland to be a Republic, independent of Britain. Battles ensued and many people died. The violence stopped on April 30th with the surrender of the rebels. Most of the rebel leaders were then executed by the British. The rebellion was named "the Easter Rising".

The Partition of Ireland

In December 1918, the Sinn Fein party won a significant number of seats in the House of Commons. They then formed an Irish Republican parliament and declared power over the entire island. What followed is known as the "War of Independence". The Irish Republican Army (the army of the newly declared Irish Republic – the IRA) waged a guerilla war against British forces from 1919 to 1921. Subsequently, the Government of Ireland Act (1920) proposed two self-governing regions: Northern Ireland (mostly Protestant) and Southern Ireland (mostly Catholic), both within the UK. But instead, in December 1921, a treaty was signed and independence was granted to Southern Ireland, dividing the country into two regions – Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (mostly Catholic). However, opinions were so divided, that a civil war followed, from 1922 to 1923, between pro-treaty and anti-treaty forces. In 1937, a new constitution declared Southern Ireland as a sovereign nation, and the island was formally divided, with Northern Ireland remaining part of Britain and the UK. In 1949, the Irish Free State officially became a republic, cutting the last formal ties with Britain. It then became known as The Republic of Ireland ("Eire", in Irish, pronunciation: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/pronunciation/english/eire).

Northern Ireland (1960–1998)

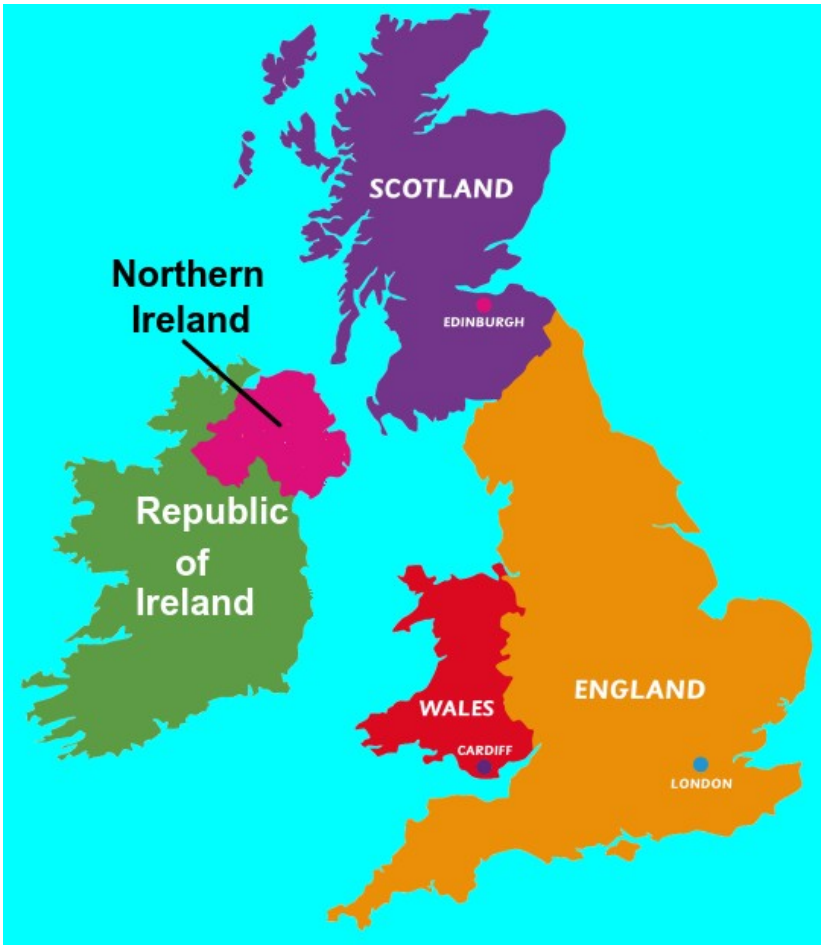
Continuing tensions between the Catholic minority (favouring Irish unity) and the Protestant majority (favouring British rule) led to decades of brutal conflict (a period called "the Troubles"). The "Nationalists" (Catholic) battled the "Unionists" (Protestant) with paramilitary groups like the IRA. The British government sent thousands of soldiers to the area to try to limit the conflict, but failed to do so. In 1972, British forces killed 13 people during a Catholic demonstration in Derry. This event became known as "Bloody Sunday". During "the Troubles", over 3,500 people were killed in bombings, shootings, and riots. The period of 'the Troubles' only finished with the "Good Friday Agreement" of April 10th 1998. It was agreed that:

- The power of the government in Northern Ireland was to be shared between the two sides;
- The border between the two countries was to remain open;
- Northern Ireland could join the Republic if the people voted for it in the future.

(In 1973, both the UK and the Republic of Ireland joined the European Union.)

The Two Irelands of Today:

Aspect	Republic of Ireland	Northern Ireland
Status:	Independent	Part of the UK
Capital:	Dublin	Belfast
Religion:	Mostly Catholic	Mostly Protestant
Language:	English & Irish Gaelic (example: https://tuairisc.ie/)	English
Currency:	Euro (€)	Pound Sterling (£)



The colours of the Irish flag:

Green: represents the Catholics

White: represents peace

Orange: represents the Protestants

Why did They Separate?

- Religious Divide – Protestant north vs Catholic south;
- Cultural Identity – British loyalism in the north vs Irish nationalism in the south;
- Economic Interests – Northern industry (especially Belfast) has strong ties to Britain;
- Political Power – Unionists and Nationalists couldn't agree on who should hold power;
- Violent Conflicts – The War of Independence and decades of violence forced a solution.

Brexit

Brexit significantly complicated the relationship between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

Before Brexit, both Northern Ireland (part of the UK) and the Republic of Ireland were in the European Union (EU). This meant that there were no border checks on the island – goods and people moved freely between the north and the south. This open border was a key part of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which ended decades of violence.

After Brexit, Northern Ireland left the EU but the Republic of Ireland remained. This created the problem of a closed border with customs and immigration checks for goods and people. This is something that nobody wanted, because it would severely disrupt trade and daily life.

A solution was eventually found and was called “The Northern Ireland Protocol”. To avoid a closed border, the UK and the EU agreed that:

- There would be no border checks, just like before;
- Goods and people could move freely between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;
- Goods moving between England and Northern Ireland would be subject to checks (at ports);

Many Unionists (pro-UK) don't support the protocol, as they say that the sea border separates them from the rest of the UK and that it undermines their position in the UK. However, the Nationalists (anti-UK) support the protocol, as they say that it protects the all-Ireland economy.

Summary

Issue	Pre-Brexit	Post-Brexit
Land border:	Open	Open
Trade between England and NI:	Free	Customs and immigration checks
Political tension in NI:	Moderate	High
Talks of Irish unity:	Occasional	More frequent

Today, in a post-Brexit economy, the people of Northern Ireland are divided on the issue of whether to remain in the United Kingdom or to join a united Ireland. Here are some opinions:

- **Unionist Farmer (65):** “We’ve been British for generations. I don’t want Dublin running my life.”
- **Nationalist Teacher (35):** “The UK is falling apart. I want an Ireland where we all belong.”
- **Student (Age 20):** “I just want a job, peace, and good healthcare. I don’t care about borders.”

A successful united Ireland proposal with detailed plans (for the economy, NHS, pensions, etc.) could sway some opinions. Threats to the Northern Ireland Protocol also might push more people toward unification. In general, opinions are cautious and divided, but people are more open to discussion than ever before.