

A BRIEF HISTORY OF IRELAND

Today, Ireland is a country with a bright future. In 2004, “Economist” magazine selected it as the best place in the world to live, and hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world have moved there in the last decade. But this was not always the case. Ireland has a long, often bloody and tragic history.



Ireland was first settled around the year 8000 BC, when hunter-gatherers came from Great Britain and Europe, possibly by land bridge. They lived by hunting and fishing for about four thousand years. Around 4000 BC they began to farm and the old hunter-gatherer lifestyle gradually died out.

The descendants of these people built burial mounds and impressive monuments such as Ireland’s most famous prehistoric site, Newgrange. Newgrange is a stone tomb dated to sometime before 3000 BC, older than the pyramids in Egypt.

Early Irish society was organized into a number of kingdoms with a rich culture, a learned upper class and craftsmen who, among other artifacts, created elaborate and beautiful metalwork with bronze, iron and gold.

Irish society was pagan for thousands of years, but this changed in the early fifth century AD when Christian missionaries including the legendary St. Patrick arrived. Christianity replaced the old pagan religions by the year 600. These monks introduced the Roman alphabet to what had been largely an oral culture. They wrote down part of the rich collection of traditional stories, legends and mythology, which might have otherwise been lost.

Two centuries later, from the early ninth century AD, Vikings invaded Ireland. These attacks went on for over 100 years. At first they raided monasteries and villages. Eventually, they built settlements on the island, many of which grew into important towns. Irish cities founded by the Viking invaders include Limerick, Cork, Wexford and Dublin, the capital city of the Republic of Ireland. Irish society eventually assimilated the descendants of the Vikings.

The year 1169 saw another invasion that had severe consequences for the island. An invasion of Norman mercenaries marked the beginning of more than seven centuries of Norman and English rule in Ireland. The Norman/English control over Ireland was expanded until the beginning of the 13th century, when the new rulers began to be assimilated into Irish society, like the Vikings had been before them.

The Reformation brought this time of relative peace to a brutal end. Beginning in 1534, military campaigns put down Irish chiefs who would not submit to the English king. People were massacred. A policy of “plantations” began: land was confiscated from Catholic Irish landowners, and given to Protestant settlers from England and Scotland. During the next century and a half, Catholic Ireland was conquered, and religion became a source of division and strife, a role it would have until recent times.

During the 18th century, many laws were passed that discriminated against Catholics. The native Gaelic language was banned in schools. By 1778, only

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five percent of the land was owned by Catholics. In 1801, the Irish Parliament was abolished and Ireland became part of “the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland”. Catholics could not hold parliamentary office until 1829.

Poverty was widespread. For many Irish, potatoes were the most important food. In 1845, disaster struck: the potato blight. This disease destroyed much of the potato crop for the next few years. The cause of the blight was not immediately understood, and the English rulers did little to help the situation. About a million people died of starvation or disease. Another million emigrated to escape poverty and starvation. Because of the potato blight, the population of Ireland fell from more than eight million, in 1841, to about six million, in 1852. The population continued to decline more slowly until the second half of the 20th century.

Efforts to gain home rule and improve the condition of the people went on during the 19th century. There were movements for land reform, and to make Gaelic the official language of Ireland once again. There was strong Protestant opposition to these demands and, by 1900, civil war loomed. The Home Rule Act was passed in 1914 and would have given Ireland some autonomy, but it was suspended when WWI started.

There was an uprising on Easter Day, April 24, in 1916. The Easter Uprising failed to spread beyond Dublin, and the leaders were arrested and executed. Their brutal treatment tipped public opinion in favor of independence. The Irish War of Independence began in 1919, and continued until 1921.

In 1922, the southern 26 counties of Ireland seceded from the United Kingdom. The new country called itself the Irish Free State. Gaelic was restored as the official national language, together with English. Ties with Great Britain were cut in 1948, and it became known as the Republic of Ireland. The other six counties in the north of the Ireland, called Northern Ireland, remained part of the UK, and they still are today.

This did not end the conflict. There was sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, between Nationalists, largely Catholics, who wanted Northern Ireland to unite with the Irish Republic, and the Unionists, mostly Protestants, who were loyal to Great Britain. This unrest exploded violently in the late 1960s, a time called the Troubles. It did not end until 1998, when a peace agreement was signed.

Economically, things slowly began to look up for the Irish after the establishment of the Irish Republic. The economy began to grow in the late 1950s. The population began to increase for the first time since the Potato Blight in the 1860s, but even today, at about 4 million, it is still only half its 1841 level.

Ireland joined the EEC (now the European Union) in 1973. Membership did much to improve the Irish economy, both through direct aid and by increasing foreign investment there. The Irish economy boomed in the 1990s, so much so that Ireland was given the nickname, “the Celtic Tiger”. After centuries of poverty and suffering, Ireland is now a prosperous, modern country with much to offer the world.

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Choose the best answer to the questions below.

Multiple-choice

- How long ago was Ireland first settled?
 - 100,000 years ago
 - 10,000 years ago
 - 8,000 years ago
 - 1,000 years ago
- What traces remain of the early inhabitants of Ireland?
 - They left no traces
 - Spears and boats
 - Burial mounds and monuments such as Newgrange
 - Cave paintings
- What was the original form of religion in Ireland?
 - Paganism
 - Christianity
 - Judaism
 - No one knows
- Who brought the Roman alphabet to Ireland?
 - Hunter-gatherers
 - Romans
 - Viking invaders
 - Christian missionaries
- How long did the Viking invasions of Ireland last?
 - A decade
 - A century
 - Two centuries
 - A millennium
- Which Irish cities were built by the Vikings?
 - Limerick
 - Cork and Wexford
 - Dublin
 - All of the above
- Who invaded Ireland in 1169?
 - Hunter-gatherers
 - Christian missionaries
 - Vikings
 - Normans
- What was a source of conflict in Ireland for centuries?
 - Religion
 - Literature
 - History
 - All of the above
- When was Ireland made part of the United Kingdom?
 - 1534
 - 1801
 - 1916
 - 1948
- What caused the population of Ireland to fall by two million in just a decade?
 - Vikings
 - The Reformation
 - The potato blight
 - Emigration

Name _____ Date _____

Answer the following short answer questions.

1. What country shares a border with the Republic of Ireland?

2. What is the capital city of the Republic of Ireland?

3. Throughout Irish history there were three major groups of people that came across to the island. What were the groups and about when did they start moving to Ireland?

4. Who first wrote down the early legends and other oral culture of Ireland?

5. What eventually happened to the Vikings in Ireland? Were they driven out?

6. What was "plantation policy"?

7. When was the Easter Uprising and what effect did it have on the efforts for Irish independence?

8. Did independence end the conflict everywhere on the island of Ireland?

9. What was Ireland's nickname in the 1990s?

10. What are the official languages of Ireland?

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Use complete sentences to answer the questions below

1. Describe an experience or situation in your life that is similar to the Irish being discriminated against in their own country.

2. From the way it is used in the article what do you think is the meaning of *mercenaries*?

3. What do you predict (using evidence from text) will be the impact or result of Ireland's membership in the European Union in the future?

4. Imagine yourself on an island that is being invaded by Vikings. Describe what you would do.

5. What do you understand differently after reading about the history of Ireland. Describe how you might use this information in the future.

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Answers to A Brief History of Ireland.

Multiple-choice:

1. b
2. c
3. a
4. d
5. b
6. d
7. d
8. a
9. b
10. c

1. The Republic of Ireland shares a border with Northern Ireland, which is part of the UK.
2. Dublin is the capital city of the Republic of Ireland.
3. Hunter-gatherers were the first group of people to populate Ireland around 8000 BC. Vikings began invading in the early 9th century. Normans invaded Ireland in 1169.
4. Christian monks brought the Roman alphabet to Ireland, and they recorded the traditional stories and legends.
5. The Viking invaders built settlements in Ireland, many of which grew into cities that still exist today. They were not driven out, but were instead assimilated into Irish society.
6. Land was confiscated from Catholic Irish and given to Protestant English and Scottish settlers.
7. The Easter Uprising was a failed rebellion that took place on April 24th, 1916, Easter Sunday. It was crushed and the leaders were executed by the British. This brutality turned public opinion against British control and in favor of independence.
8. Religious strife continued in Northern Ireland between Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists. It did not end until 1998 when a peace agreement was signed.
9. "The Celtic Tiger"
10. Gaelic and English

Short-answer questions

1. Answers will vary. Accept logical, realistic answers.
2. Mercenaries = professional soldiers fighting for a foreign army
3. Answers will vary. Accept logical, realistic answers.
4. Answers will vary. Accept logical, realistic answers.
5. Answers will vary. Accept logical, realistic answers.