

The Penal Days 1691 - 1760

The Penal Laws which were passed in Ireland during the reigns of William and Mary, William III, Anne, and George I and II, from 1691 to 1760. In Ireland, the "Penal Laws" is the name given to the code of laws passed by the Protestant Parliament of Ireland which regulated the status of Roman Catholics through most of the eighteenth century. The declared purpose of the Irish Penal Laws, was to disenfranchise the native majority from all power, both political and economic.. The ideal was to entice the colonized Irish to conversion to Protestantism.

The Catholics were the native Irish population and were excluded from public life and had no say in governmental affairs for over 100 years. Most of the Irish Landlords paid little attention to the condition of life for their tenants. Many appointed "middlemen" as property managers who raised the rents to make a profit for themselves. This system encouraged greed on the part of the middlemen and caused the tenants much suffering. There were however a few landowners who treated their tenants fairly.



The tenants life was tough. They lived in small one or two room mud cabins called "hovels" They raised food in their garden and existed almost entirely on potatoes, salt and milk. They grew corn and raised pigs to pay their taxes, rent and "tithes" – an annual payment for the support of the protestant clergy. Rents were high and failure to pay, or pay on time resulted with eviction, their cabin burned and left homeless on the roadside.

The Penal Laws denied the Irish people the right to an education and "hedge schools" sprung up across the country. The hedge schools helped to preserve the native language, the history but vast numbers grew up unable to read or write.

In spite of the Penal Laws many priests and bishops remained with their flock. They remained concealed in the woods and mountains and tended to their congregation in any way they could. Masses were said in homes or open fields with look outs perched on hill tops to warn of the approach of government forces. Today in Ireland it is

common, in certain places, to celebrate mass on the "Mass Rock" as a reminder of those dreaded days past. Priests who were captured were killed.

The Penal Laws included trade restrictions on Irish products. All goods had to pass through England where heavy duties were imposed. No trading between Ireland and English colonies was permitted. No export of woollens to the continent was allowed. The export of cotton and glass was prohibited also. Since most manufacturing in the north was almost entirely in Protestant hands unemployment was widespread.

During these times, not only were Catholics deprived of their right to practice their religion, so too were the "dissenters". Since the State Religion was known as the Established Church, Presbyterians, Quakers as well as other Protestant sects who did not succumb, were known as dissenters, and subject to the same laws to a lesser degree. This included the Scottish who came to Northern Ireland following the flight of the Earls during the Plantation of Ulster. A few generations later many of the Scotch-Irish would seek escape in the New World of the Shenandoah Valley in the U.S.