More than most countries, Ireland lends itself to imaginative speculation about its early origins. Because so much of the island surface is physically as it has been for thousands of years, one can see clearly where early inhabitants came ashore, the estuaries they boated into, the fertile plains into which they drove their animals and settled.

The habitations of these early migratory tribes are accessible today. Two settlements which have been excavated and re-built with insight and care are Newgrange in Co. Meath and Lough Gur in Co. Limerick. Visitors are welcome at both sites. Newgrange is a large mound with a narrow passageway underneath leading into a chamber. It has recently been dated as older than the Great Pyramid of Egypt and current controversy wavers between defining its function as that of a tomb or as a highly sophisticated observatory of the solar system. Whatever its original use, a visit wafts one back in time and there is a magical experience to be had there on the winter solstice (21 December) when the rays of the rising sun shine through the passageway and illuminate the inner chamber.

At Lough Gur one can perceive the span of early history from the Stone Age to the Celtic period. Implements, ornaments and arms have been retrieved, notably bronze shields and weapons, which show how the Celts, who arrived about 500 B.C., dominated much of the island and imposed their language and culture. Again, a visit becomes a journey into lost time and one also gains a sense of how each wave of invaders merged with the ones before and made from that fusion a distinctive civilisation.

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That organised society, by the first millennium, was marked by a written language (Ogham script), by a system of laws, territories and chieftains and by the druidic religion, which has left us the many ‘standing stones’ which continue to excite scholarly speculation. Known as the ‘La Tène’ Celts from their origins in central Europe, this people flourished, producing a range of artistic artefacts that show the influence of contact with the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean cultures. (The Hunt Museum in Limerick has detailed displays.)

The Celts also engaged in raids upon Roman Britain, out of which came, according to legend and as a captured slave, the boy Patrick who is credited with bringing Christianity to Ireland (A.D. 432). As in previous fusions the ‘new’ Christianity absorbed many of the customs of the ‘old-style’ druidic practices but was notable for its use of a developed, vernacular Hiberno-Latin and most distinctively for the growth of monastic settlements. There was hardly an area on the island which did not have its own ‘cill’ (Kill – church) and settlement of holy men and women who engaged in prayer, tillage and the creation of illustrated books. From that period of eight hundred monasteries comes the flowering of the Monastic Age (450-750), the spread of Christianity and the books of great beauty which are the main record of events of the time, e.g. the Book of Durrow, the Book of Ballymote, the Book of Kells with its intricate illuminations (c. 750) which may be seen at Trinity College, Dublin.

The Scandinavians came about A.D. 795, in longships and with a marauding prowess that established settlements along the east coast. In many cases they sacked existing habitations, in others they absorbed and merged with local populations, forming Norse, or Viking, communities. Examples of their coinage, clothes and buildings are displayed in the National Museum in Dublin and remnants of their style of living are evident in inner city areas of Dublin, Limerick and Waterford.

Defeated at the Battle of Clontarf at the mouth of the Liffey in 1014 by Brian Boru, the High King, the Norse merged with the native population, their descendants taking up the family names decreed by custom afterwards – mainly prefixed with ‘Mac’ and ‘O’ meaning ‘son of’ or ‘out of’ (e.g. MacDonnell, McKiernan, MacWilliam, O’Donnell, O’Grady, O’Carroll, O’Brien, etc.)
By this time the island was inhabited mainly on its coastal regions and along the concourse of its rivers. The population may have been less than half a million, living in tribal and family association, mostly engaged in farming, though with strong scholarly traditions and trading links with Scotland, France and Spain.

There were successive high kingships, much disputed, and territorial and tribal squabbles. Such conflicts encouraged a foray of barons from England (Fitz Stephen, de Montmorency and de Prendergast), known as Normans because of their Norman-French origins, who landed at Wexford in 1169 – followed by ‘Strongbow’ the Earl of Pembroke, with an armed force whose superior military style and strategy established what was to become, in effect, the English military presence on the island.

The Norman conquest brought also a civic system of town layout, small manufacturing industries, cut-stone castles and religious orders – notably the Augustinians – and made way for the arrival of King Henry II who formally brought the eastern part of Ireland into his kingdom. Much of the conflict during ensuing centuries was caused by the attempts of English monarchs to hold and enlarge their area of domination. Bedevilled by the tendency of successive settlers to ‘become more Irish than the Irish’ and consequently to resist rule from England, monarchs from Henry II to Henry V fought wars in Ireland, with varying success. In spite of the Statutes of Kilkenny, 1366, which forbade the Norman-English and the ‘native’ Irish to coalesce, joint Norman-Irish resistance to English expansion continued, provoking King Henry VII to send Edward Poynings to Ireland in 1494 to bring the country ‘to whole and perfect obedience’ – from which emanated ‘Poynings’ Law’, a statute which declared an Irish parliament to be subject to an English one.

Outside ‘The Pale’ of English domination on the east coast, such parliaments had no writ: the Gaelic order survived, with its inherited alliances of Irish and Norman family power, until Queen Elizabeth I decided on a military campaign.

From 1592 until 1603, and with a succession of military commanders (Raleigh, Essex, Spencer, Mountjoy), Elizabeth prosecuted a war of attrition. Much of the countryside was laid bare. The old Gaelic order was ravaged. A day before her death, Elizabeth received the submission of the O’Neills and O’Donnells of Ulster. Ireland became effectively an English colony at the high point of Elizabethan imperial expansion around the known world. Protestantism became the established state religion. An artefact of that time, The Book of Common Prayer, in Gaelic, may be seen at Marsh’s Library in Dublin.

The policy of ‘plantation’ adopted at this time brought Protestant settlers from England who were given ownership of land in Ireland. With these settlers came the building of high stone houses and the imposition of English laws, manners and dress. Taxes were levied by the Crown, proselytising took place on a grand scale, the terms ‘Englishtown’ and ‘Irishtown’ became commonplace definitions of where conquerors and conquered lived. Outside the towns and cities, the dispossessed brooded in uneasy nomadic settlements, tinder for
Such was the ‘state of the nation’ which sparked the killings of Ulster Protestants in 1641, incidents later used by Oliver Cromwell to justify his merciless retaliation against the Catholic Irish who had sided with the royalist cause of King Charles I. The Cromwellian campaigns further destroyed the cities and towns: Drogheda, Clonmel, Wexford and Limerick were fought over in bitter sieges. By 1650, further land clearances had deprived thousands of Catholic Irish of their livelihoods and places of habitation: of the twelve million acres of usable land, eleven million were owned by Cromwellian planters in 1660. Only the western counties of Clare, South Galway and parts of Kerry and Mayo remained in the ownership of the Irish. In time, the new ‘adventurers’ again merged with the existing population, except in Ulster where a constant flow of settlers from Scotland emphasised the political and religious demarcations of power.

Domestic differences in Britain and the wider European wars were fought out in Ireland at the close of the 1600s. At the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, the Protestant William of Orange defeated the Catholic King James II of England as part of a wider conflict involving Spain, France, England, Holland and Scotland. Nonetheless, its date (12 July) is still celebrated with colourful parades by Ulster Protestants.

The eighteenth century Penal Laws excluded the Catholic Irish from positions of power and the country was ruled by an Ascendancy, as it came to be called, of Protestant Anglo-Irish who, with the inevitability of historical cycle, resented being ruled from London. Two among them who championed Irish independence and freedom of religious expression were Henry Grattan and Theobald Wolfe Tone – the first a constitutionalist who brought about a separate legislative parliament (Grattan’s Parliament) and Tone, a Protestant republican, who sought the same end by more forceful means. Neither was to have substantial success: the Act of Union of 1800 formally bound both countries under one parliament at Westminster in London.

From that time, the heyday of the Anglo-Irish, come most of Dublin’s civic buildings and the roots of Anglo-Irish literature. The Georgian squares and streets are fine examples of their type and the architectural glories of Gandon can be seen at the Custom House, the Four Courts and the King’s Inns. Writers Burke, Congreve, Swift and Goldsmith came out of the Anglo-Irish world. Equally, from the parliamentary union of the two countries came many of the subsequent ills of Ireland. Laid at the door of maladministration were the harrowing Famine of 1846-50, with its two million fatalities, and the land wars and evictions which
provoked the Fenian uprising of 1867.

Like many European countries of the late nineteenth century, Ireland was a place of great social inequalities. A privileged political elite ruled over a large, and largely deprived, population. High infant mortality, inadequate housing and poor sanitation were widespread. Against the background of the carnage of the Great War, fought by European imperial powers, came the Rebellion of Easter 1916 – an armed uprising against British rule in Ireland. Hostilities terminated with the Treaty of 1921, out of which came the present political settlement of the country. The Treaty was followed by an internal Civil War. According to the terms of the Treaty, the six north-eastern counties remained part of the United Kingdom while the other twenty-six counties formed a separate state.

The twenty-six counties have, since 1949, been internationally recognised as the Republic of Ireland. It is a self-governing, sovereign democracy with two houses of legislature – the Dáil and the Seanad (Senate). It has a growing population – currently showing the first increase since the Famine – and the highest proportion of young people in Europe.

Since 1973, Ireland has been a full member of the European Union (European Community at the time) and partakes fully in the Union’s work. No longer a predominantly rural society, two-thirds of its citizens live in towns and cities, a transference of life style that has brought enhanced opportunities on the one hand and severe urban problems on the other. Though agriculture is pivotal to the economy, the 1970s brought an expansion in export-oriented manufacturing, with an emphasis on high technology. There is a flourishing of the arts: literature, theatre, dance and music enjoy widespread popularity.

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