

Honors Thesis Proposal: Ian McLaughlin (History)

Working title

"Legislative Instructions in Ireland and the Emergence of Public Opinion, 1760-1787"

Project Purpose

Through this project, I aim to identify and explain factors that contributed to the legitimation of public opinion as a political force in late eighteenth century Europe (with a focus on the English-speaking world), using the lens of Irish politics during the 1770s-80s. I plan to place these Irish debates, which centered on the validity of appealing to "the people's will" in crafting legislation, within the wider context of the contemporary British parliamentary reform movement and trends in Enlightenment philosophy on the nature of popular sovereignty.

Project Importance

The main sources for my paper—a trove of newspaper articles and Parliamentary debates about the use of legislative instructions in Ireland in 1779—are seriously neglected in both Irish historiography and the historiography of public opinion in England during the time period. The only book on (American) revolutionary-era Ireland that mentions the legislative instructions does so in a cursory manner, giving greater weight to other forms of extra-parliamentary political activity like parades and processions; this is problematic because the records of the Irish House of Commons reveal that the instructions were highly significant to contemporaries—furthermore, their language (and that of the representatives' responses, both of which were published in the newspapers) help elucidate the assumptions of their authors about the nature of representation in a way that public processions cannot. Meanwhile, research on public opinion in the English-language press is largely limited to England itself (with Wales and/or Scotland sometimes thrown in briefly as bonuses).

My hope is that both the geographically marginal and ideologically peculiar nature of the legislative instructions episode in Ireland will help illuminate the broader terms of the debate between reformers and defenders of aristocratic prerogatives in the British Isles and, indeed, the Western European world in the years leading up to the French Revolution in a way that research solely focused on England and/or France has been unable to do.

Project Overview

In October and November 1779, groups of Irish voters gathered in county meetings to draft instructions for their local members of Parliament, urging—or, in some cases, demanding—that they pass a resolution calling for greater political and economic autonomy from Great Britain.¹ Although such a resolution was in fact passed in December of that same year, historian Maurice O'Connell, one of the foremost authorities on this time period, dismisses any possible role played by these representative-specific petitions (known as legislative instructions). Instead, he sees the whole episode as an "embarrassment" for the resolution's supporters, who were eager not to be seen as catering to the mob.²

Something struck me as off about O'Connell's characterization. After diving into original newspaper sources for a term paper, I discovered that the issuance of legislative instructions had divided the

¹ Maurice R. O'Connell, *Irish Politics and Social Conflict in the Age of the American Revolution* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 175-180.

² *Ibid.*, 181-182.

Parliament and the Dublin elite far more deeply than O'Connell allowed. It is true that many MPs, even some supporters of the resolution, recoiled from their constituents' manifest impertinence. Others, however, rejoiced at this outpouring of popular support, asserting that their "endeavors in the public cause, [would] receive considerable weight when seconded by the voice of [their] constituents."³ Overall, my research led me to believe that there was something quite significant to the panicked responses of the gentry to the more self-conscious entry of the middle classes into political life. Like their contemporaries in England, the authors of the instructions seemed to be aware that they were "challeng[ing] traditional limits upon the political influence of public opinion."⁴

However, due to the limited scope of that paper's requirements (10 pages, max), I had to neglect many important sources, somewhat handicapping my argument. Additionally, I was unable to fully contextualize the demographics of the Irish political nation, and I left what I now consider the most important element of any thorough analysis—the broader debate raging across the English-speaking world about the nature of parliamentary representation—entirely untouched.

For this project, then, I plan to analyze all twenty petitions and their representatives' responses (available at the British Newspaper Archive online), as well as trace, in pamphlets and parliamentary speeches, the continued repercussions of this brief episode in Irish political debates throughout the 1780s. I also plan to investigate the response of the English political class to the Irish situation, noting especially any explicit parallels made between legislative instructions and their own Reform movement. Finally, I plan to sketch the contours of contemporary discourses on the social contract and the general will, and to hypothesize (if no more direct evidence is available) as to how these may have enabled / determined the terms of reform argument on both sides of the Irish Sea.

Qualifications of Thesis Committee

Advisor: Matt Mason, Associate Professor, Department of History

As a specialist in the political history of African slavery, Professor Mason is familiar with the role of public opinion in bringing about the abolition of the slave trade in Great Britain immediately after my time period (the late 1780s). I took a course in British history (HIST 323) from him last year and trust his judgment and writing/research advice immensely.

Reader: Kendall Brown, Professor, Department of History

I developed the paper that led to this proposal in one of Professor Brown's classes. His background studying and teaching Enlightenment philosophy will be particularly valuable in helping me to place my political sources in their broader ideological context.

Department Honors Coordinator: Aaron Skabelund, Associate Professor, Department of History

Project Timeline

- ❖ Apr 2017: Conduct additional background research
- ❖ May-Jun 2017: Continue research; complete detailed outline of paper; begin writing process

³ James Stewart and Armar Lowry Corry (Tyrone County MPs), *Dublin Evening Post*, 25 November 1779.

⁴ Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 76.

- (5-10 pages)
- ❖ Jul-Aug 2017: Develop timeline with my Cambridge supervisor (see "Funding," below); finish writing the first draft; correspond with BYU faculty advisor (Prof. Mason) about major changes and developments
 - ❖ Sep-Oct 2017: Work with Prof. Mason to improve the paper through re-writing and additional research if/where necessary
 - ❖ Nov 2017: Submit improved draft to faculty reader (Prof. Brown); implement his feedback
 - ❖ Dec 2017: Copy-edit paper; ponder any additional changes
 - ❖ Jan or Feb 2017: Thesis defense

Funding

I plan on writing the bulk of the thesis during the 2017 Pembroke-King's Programme at Cambridge University as part of a mentored research "supervision" experience. If I were to receive the full \$1,000 of funding possible, it will almost pay for the cost of the supervision (£800, additional to the rest of the program). This will enable me to work closely with a specialist in my subject area over an intense eight-week period, facilitating the fast and effective completion of the bulk of the writing and feedback process.

Culminating Experience

When finished, I plan to submit the paper to the journal *Eighteenth Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr* as well as to the journal's annual conference for 2018, to be held in Dublin in June.

Preliminary Bibliography

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