

# Engels visits Ireland

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Frederich Engels visited Ireland three times in his life.

Some years ago a rumour arose regarding a visit Vladimir Lenin made to Ireland<sup>1</sup>. The rumour proved false, but one person whose philosophy Lenin built his soviet ideals on, did visit Ireland.

Frederich Engels made three trips to Ireland. His first journey was in 1856, during a time when the effects of the great famine were still being felt across the land. Engels made two more trips to Ireland in 1869 and 1870, where he witnessed a growing sense of national identity against the oppression dished out by British rule.

The interest Engels had in Ireland first emerged through the close friendship he formed with two Irish sisters, Mary and Lydia Burns. Engels grew extremely close to the two women and Mary would become his partner until her sudden death in 1863 at the age of 41.

The parents of the Burns sisters emigrated from Tipperary to Manchester where Mary and Lydia were born, but defying the location of their birth they instead proudly considered themselves Irish. Mary and Lizzie's father worked as a cloth dyer but the family were plagued by poverty and he subsequently ended his days in a workhouse. Growing up in destitution fueled the sisters radical political opinions while their Irish roots spurred their nationalism and all of this endeared Engels to them.

<sup>1</sup>The 'rumour' came from Enda Kenny who, in August 2012, called Michael Collins, 'The outstanding organiser who brought Lenin himself to Ireland to see how the National Loan worked.' It was complete but rather funny fantasy. [Editor's note]

<sup>2</sup>For which he wrote numerous notes. See [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/history-ireland/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/history-ireland/index.htm)

The Burns sisters met the German philosopher in 1840s Manchester and he instantly became enthralled by Ireland and all things Irish. He even tried to learn the Irish language and had designs on producing a work on the history of Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

The Burns sisters introduced Engels to the poverty ridden working class areas of Manchester where the majority of the population were immigrants and through this he was able to finish his famous work *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844.

Engels himself was far removed from the type of poverty which afflicted the working class of 19th century England. He was born into a well-to-do middle class family in Germany in 1820 and was sent to Manchester as a young man to run a cotton mill. Engels may have championed social and economic equality for the less well off and is considered a father of Communism along with Karl Marx, but he also enjoyed the finer things in life. He partook in hobbies such as horse riding and hunting while also enjoying fine wine, good food and soirees with his middle class friends. Engels also financially supported Marx and his family who more than often found themselves in dire need.

Engles brought Mary and Lizzie into his circle of radical thinkers, but the Burns sisters already held rather socially progressive views and in turn helped shape Engels' political ideas and worldview. Mary's sister Lydia, known better as Lizzie, was just as radical in her social and political thinking as Mary was and in the aftermath of Mary's death Engels married Lizzie.

On his first trip to Ireland in May 1856, Engels travelled from Dublin to Galway with Mary. He wrote a letter to Marx on May 23rd detailing his trip. He describes the social and geographical aspects of Ireland to his close friend, telling him how his trav-

els started from Dublin and went onwards across to Galway. From there the journey took in Limerick, along the river Shannon, then to North Kerry, Tralee, Killarney and back to Dublin. Engels describes the city of Dublin as being 'built in an exclusively English style' while he tells how the towns and villages outside of the capital city 'look like France or Northern Italy.'

In his letter to Marx, Engels is critical of British rule in Ireland when he writes; 'the government meddles in everything, there is no trace of the so called self government. It can be clearly seen that Ireland is the first English colony and one which is still ruled directly in the old way on account of its proximity.'<sup>3</sup>

Engels was also alarmed at the British militarisation of the small country and was considerably ungracious regarding this. He writes to Marx; 'In no land have I seen so many police and the drink sodden type of the Prussian gendarmerie has here been developed to perfection into a constabulary armed with carbines, bayonets and handcuffs.'

In his letter to Marx, Engels refers to the harshness of English rule in Ireland by informing his friend how 'the country has been completely ruined by the pillaging wars of the English.' He goes on to state that the Irish 'can no longer feel at home in their own country. Ireland for the Saxon! That is now being achieved.' Engels targets British imperialism when he states how 'the manner in which England rules this country is through repression and corruption.'

Engles also paints a picture of the ever increasing population decline when he writes about the impact of emigration and its direct link to imperial oppression. He states;

How often have the Irish begun to achieve something and every time they have been crushed, politically and industrially! They have been artificially transformed by the persistent and through going oppression into a completely demoralised

people, and are now notoriously fulfilling the role of providing England, America, Australia etc with whores, day labourers, bullies, pickpockets, swindlers, beggars and other demoralised elements.

Engels notes in his letter how the famine left many ruins across the country, 'especially in the region round Galway, the country is covered with these ruins of peasant cottages, most of which have been abandoned only since 1846.' The great hunger which pushed many thousands of people into mass graves or emigration across the Atlantic, impacted on the journey Engels made around Ireland in 1856 when he saw at first hand the result of this catastrophe.

He writes in his letter to Marx: 'While villages are deserted, there amongst them lie the splendid parks of the lesser landlords who are almost the only people who live there now. Famine migration and clearances together have accomplished this.' He describes to Marx how the landscape too has been shaped by the famine when he tells how 'there are not even cattle to be seen in the fields. The land is an utter desert which nobody wants.'

Nor does Engels does not let the bourgeois land owners in Ireland off lightly, as he attacks their wealth or rather the lack of evidence of the root of such wealth. In his letter to Marx, Engels tells of how a 'demoralised character persists also in the aristocracy.' He goes on to state that 'their houses are surrounded by enormous and wonderful demesnes but outside these the country is a desert and where their money comes from is nowhere to be seen.'

Engels informs Marx how the landed gentry types in Ireland have all the airs and graces but the hidden reality was that they owned nothing more than a pile of debt and as Engels wrote; 'they live in fear of the encumbered estates court.'

Although he visited Ireland twice more after his first trip in 1856, it was his first encounter with the impoverished and oppressed little country that left an impression

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<sup>3</sup>A substantial selection of Engels' letters to Marx dealing with Ireland is to be found in Marx, Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1986.

on the German radical and this is clear in his long and insightful letter to Marx.

Engels wrote about the poverty he witnessed in Oughterard in north Galway, describing how the after effects of the famine left the area socially depleted and stated that he never understood that 'famine could be such a tangible reality.' The mud hut dwellings of the Irish peasants in the west of Ireland led Engels to describe to Marx how great social and economic inequalities were ravishing Ireland. He writes; 'whole villages are deserted and there amongst them lie the splendid parks of the lesser landlords.'

Seeing a demoralized society at first hand endeared Engels even more to the cause of Irish freedom, not on a nationalistic front but rather on a social one.

Engels made a third trip to Ireland in 1870, not long after his second trip in 1869. On his second trip to Ireland in 1869 he travelled around Wicklow, Killarney and Cork and bore witness to a country going through political and social change. The famine was by then a bitter memory but physical force nationalism was changing social thought and this resulted in British authorities tightening security through a heavy military presence but he also noticed that a catholic bourgeoisie was emerging in this society.

Engels wrote in his notes 'the worst with the Irish is that they become corruptible as soon as they stop being peasants and fall into bourgeois ways.' Such a statement could ring true for modern day Ireland that experienced the dramatic rise and catastrophic fall of the Celtic tiger boom years.

Engels was well aware that English oppression in Ireland was one of the main problems blighting the country socially and economically. Writing to Marx during his first trip, he clearly identified it by telling his friend, 'Ireland through the English invasion, has been deprived of her whole development and thrown back centuries.'

During his trips to Ireland Engels had

filled a total of 15 notebooks with the aim of publishing a history of the country, but he never achieved such an aim. The fact that Engels never managed to write and publish his account of Irish history comes down to the other factors clogging up his life, mainly that of his role in shaping a radical left wing philosophy with Karl Marx.

In these notebooks he described the oppressive Britain imposed on Ireland. He notes 'Irish history shows one what a misfortune it is for a nation to be subjected by another nation. All the abominations of the English have their origins in the Irish pales.'

Describing the appearance of the Irish peasants, Engels wrote in his notes that 'their clothing causes them little trouble so long as it holds together by a single thread, and shoes they do not know.'

Engels goes on to describe the diet of the impoverished Irish as food consisting of potatoes and potatoes only. It may sound stereotypical but Engels does indeed paint the native Irish in a stereotypical light when he suggests in his notes that 'whatever they earn beyond their needs they spend upon drink.'

Of course the Irish weather is a big talking point for anyone in Ireland and Engels also made note of it. He wrote in his notes that 'the weather, like its inhabitants, has a more acute character, it moves in sharper more sudden contrasts, the sky is like an Irish woman's face, here also rain and sunshine succeed each other suddenly.'

The three trips Engels made to Ireland must have served as good fodder to build on his radical political thinking. Seeing the plight of the impoverished Irish for himself added to his zeal for social and economic equality and even though the other heavy weights of left wing politics such as Lenin or Marx never set foot on Irish soil, Engels, who played such an important role in the development of socialist ideas, did.