

The Irish Penal Laws

In the early 1700s the ruling English Protestants in Ireland passed laws designed to strip the Catholic majority of their land and civil rights. Some provisions of the laws included:

- Catholics were forbidden to hold public office.
- Catholics were forbidden to enter a profession
- Catholics were forbidden to engage in trade or commerce.
- Catholics were forbidden to buy land from a Protestant, to receive a gift of land from a Protestant, or to inherit anything at all from a Protestant.
- Catholics were forbidden to rent any land worth more than 30 shillings a year.
- Catholics were forbidden to live in an incorporated town or within five miles of an incorporated town.
- Catholics were forbidden to own a horse worth more than five pounds, which meant a Protestant could offer a Catholic five pounds for any horse, and the Catholic would have to take it.
- Irish culture and music was banned.
- Catholics were compelled by law to attend Protestant worship.
- It was illegal to educate a Catholic, leading to illegal outdoor schools, known as 'hedge' schools.
- When dying a Catholic could not leave his children under Catholic guardianship.
- If a Catholic woman wanted to divorce her husband, she could convert to Protestantism and get all the family property.

As a result of these laws, by 1778 Irish Catholics owned a meager 5% of Irish land, setting up the social conditions that contributed to the mass starvation of the great famine of the 1840s.