

## Ireland: England's First Colony

The first move of the English toward colonization did not take them all the way across the Atlantic, however. Instead, it brought them to Ireland, only 70 miles to the west, on the other side of the Irish Sea. Although the English kings had controlled the area around Dublin since the 12th century, the rest of the country remained firmly under the control of Irish clans who lived as farmers, shepherds, and fishermen.

The English invaded Ireland during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603). Looking down on the Irish as "savages," the English pushed the native residents off their traditional lands and onto the worst soil in swampy bogs where only potatoes, a plant imported from South America, could grow. The English waged war on the culture of the Irish too, outlawing the Catholic faith and banning the use of the Gaelic language. The Irish people who survived the onslaught were reduced to living as tenants on farms now owned by wealthy English landowners (Rapple, 2009, pp. 127–161).

The English took one more step toward controlling the Irish. They moved thousands of people from England and Scotland to live and work on Irish plantations. These new settlers, subsequently known as the **Scotch-Irish**, were Protestants who were expected to be faithful to the Church of England and the monarch who led it. They would also work as tenant farmers, raising sheep for wool to help England develop its textile industry.



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**Queen Elizabeth I, daughter of Henry VIII and granddaughter of Henry VII, was the English monarch who authorized the first attempts at colonization of North America.**

The native Irish could do little to stop these many changes. Countless numbers of them died fighting the English in one rebellion after another. Many more died of sickness and starvation (Rapple, 2009, pp. 200–249). In the process, the English learned several tragic lessons about how to settle a country that was not their own.

## Visions of West Country Men

Ambitious lesser nobility and gentlemen who lived in the western counties of England, known as the **West Country men**, were the first promoters of English colonization in the New World. Devout Protestants and equally devoted nationalists, they sought to make a name for themselves and a fortune for their families in the turbulent 16th century. Most of them had gone to sea as boys and young men and were able sailors. Many of them had also served as military commanders in the conquest of Ireland.

They led attacks on Spanish shipping—starting in 1560 and continuing until 1605—and at the same time campaigned for the establishment of colonies along North America's Atlantic Coast. They believed England had a claim to this land as the result of the explorations of John Cabot in 1497 during the reign of Henry VII.

To convince the monarchy to support colonization efforts, the West Country men enlisted the services of scholar Richard Hakluyt (Mancall, 2007, p. 3). In one of his earliest works, *A Discourse Concerning Western Planting*, Hakluyt examined four reasons why the Spanish had been so successful in America: They were committed to (1) spreading their faith, (2) taking control of the world's trade routes, (3) boosting their own economy, and (4) increasing royal power. England, he implied, must do the same.

Hakluyt realized that England's monarchs, fighting for much of the 16th century to maintain authority in their own country, were reluctant to invest in overseas ventures. But even though he allowed that "every new enterprise is in the beginning burdensome," Hakluyt still urged royals and wealthy merchants alike to fund the exploration and settlement of the New World (Hakluyt, 1589, p. 104). The wealth, power, and prestige that would come to England were too great to ignore.