

Irish Anti-Colonial Solidarity with Indigenous People

November 15, 2016

#NoDAPL

In 1847 as a famine created by both climate and man was unleashing death and destruction across Ireland, a group of charitable people across the Atlantic ocean raised money for those affected. They raised 170 dollars and these people who managed to raise such a considerable amount of money were themselves without any prosperity but gave what they had because they knew the hardships famine and oppression brought, they were Native Americans of the Choctaw Nation.

Only a decade before this charitable gesture took place, Choctaw Indians and several other indigenous tribes found their land and livelihood at the mercy of settlers. They were forced from their ancestral homes by unfair treaties designed to wipe out their way of life and had to walk the infamous Trail of Tears to survive. Like the Irish who centuries before were told by Oliver Cromwell 'to go to hell or to Connacht', America's native tribes had their land taken by settlers and the once thriving tribes of America were reduced by disease and malnutrition.

Considering the generous attitude of the Choctaw tribe towards the plight of the Irish, the man who over saw what can only be termed as a genocide of indigenous people, was a son of Irish immigrants. Andrew Jackson was the 7th president of the United States who signed off on the Indian Removal Act that triggered resettlement treaties which saw a whole generation of Native Americans banished off their fertile land.

In March 1847 the Indian government agent Colonel William Armstrong was in Oklahoma where he informed the Choctaw Indians about the famine in Ireland. He showed them newspapers and letters describing the horrors unfolding in towns and villages from Cork to Donegal.

Mass graves full of unidentified people who succumbed to starvation and disease were a common feature in many counties across Ireland. The British authority sent those looking for assistance to the dreaded workhouses where typhus and cholera ruled the day. Landlords evicted with no qualms those unable to pay rent. Tenants lucky enough to have a sympathetic landlord would see him pay for their passage to the other side of the world. Crops that did not fall victim to blight were exported overseas while corpses piled up on roadways up and down the country. Grain, wheat and oats left ports in Ireland while starving people resorted to eating grass. Victims were easily identifiable with the green grass stains around their mouths and the hollow expression of hopelessness etched on their sunken faces. The potato blight was caused by climate but the famine was a man-made act of extermination.

With memories of their own hardships still fresh in mind, the Choctaw Nation raised money to help the Irish and gave it to the Society of Friends who then sent it to the famine ravaged land. They labeled it as charity from 'The western wilderness of the western hemisphere.'

The kindness of the Native Americans to the Irish during Black '47 has been commemorated over the years in various ways. A large and most impressive stainless steel monument of Indian feathers called 'Kindred Spirits' by the artist Alex Pentek was unveiled last year in County Cork. Former Irish President Mary Robinson was made an honorary Choctaw chief while in 1990 Choctaw leaders arrived in county Mayo to walk in the footsteps of those who perished on its roads while seeking

relief from famine.

The cruel oppression of the 19th century may be consigned to the history books here in Ireland but for many Native Americans today, it seems like their status as an oppressed people continues.

This Summer saw The Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota put under the strain of so called progress. Standing Rock has been part of the Great Sioux Nation since 1873 but this year building began on a pipeline running through its land from oil fields in North West Dakota to Southern Illinois. Members of the Sioux tribe strongly protested against the pipeline as the only water supply in the reservation is severely threatened, not to mention the destruction it will bring to sacred sites there.

Peaceful protests against the pipeline have been met with utter brutality. Tear gas and attack dogs have been used against protesters. There have also been rubber bullets shot at them while a number arrested have been subjected to humiliating strip searches and to this day the Indian reservation at Standing Rock continues to be a place that harkens back to the years when infrastructure such as railroads ripped through the lands of Native Americans.

Unlike the 19th century when news of Ireland's plight managed to make an impact on those indigenous people in the U.S, today their plight at North Dakota's Standing Rock reservation has failed to ignite any interest on this side of the Atlantic ocean and it is sadly frustrating to see in the 21st century our 'Kindred spirits' still being railroaded in the name of progress.