Northern Ireland

Location

Northern Ireland is a country of the United Kingdom that occupies an area of 5,452 square miles. It makes up one-sixth of the island of Ireland and lies in the northeastern part. Northern Ireland is bound on the south and west by the Republic of Ireland, on the east by the Irish Sea and the North Sea, and on the north by the Atlantic Ocean. From north to south, Northern Ireland sits between 56 and 54 degrees north latitude and 8 and 6 degrees west longitude from east to west.

Geography

Topographically, Northern Ireland can be thought of as a saucer centered on Lough (Lake) Neagh. The rimlike edges form the country’s highlands. The Mountains of Antrim tilt upward to the coast of the north and reach an elevation of 1,817 feet at Trostan where they begin to plateau and terminate into a cliff. This forms a coastline of basalts and chalk broken by a series of glaciered valleys called glens. In the southeast, the rounded landscape of smooth, elongated mounds remaining from the melted ice culminates into the Mourne Mountains. This boasts Slieve Donard, which is the country’s highest point at 2,789 feet and located just two miles from the sea. This granite peaked landscape is bounded by Carlingford Lough to the south. To the south of Lough Neagh, the land is gentler but rises to 1,886 feet in Slieve Gullion near the Ireland border. The land rises gently to the west of Lough Neagh forming the rounded Sperrin Mountains which reach 2,224 feet at the highest point. The far southwest is on the basin of Lough Erne in a drumlin-strewn area surrounded by hills reaching over 1,000 feet in height.
Climate

The climate of Northern Ireland is temperate and maritime. Most of its weather comes from the southwest in a series of low pressure systems that bring rain and clouds that are characteristic to the landscape. The country often experiences high winds because it is near the central track of low pressures. Northern Ireland’s average rainfall is 43 inches annually. Rainfall decreases from the west to the east, although the amount in the west can be up to 80 inches due to the hills and as little as 32.5 inches at Lough Neagh in the southeast. Spring is relatively dry while summer is wet, and winter even wetter. Conditions change a great deal daily, but heat and cold extremes are unheard of. Average temperatures for January range from 38 degrees Fahrenheit on the north coast to 35 degrees Fahrenheit in the east. 65 degrees Fahrenheit is a common July temperature. During late spring and early summer, the eastern region of the country has slightly lower temperatures and a coastal fog called the “haar”. These humid and mild conditions make Northern Ireland a green country in all seasons.

History

Out of the 19th- and early 20th-century ferment that produced a sovereign state of Ireland to its south, a separate state of Northern Ireland emerged in 1920-22 as a constituent part of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland's early history is the history of the traditional Irish province of Ulster, six of whose nine counties Northern Ireland embraces. Ulster is of special importance in the mythic history of Ireland because its rulers and their champions played a prominent role in the rich Irish sagas of the Middle Ages. The Ulster cycle of these tales deals with the exploits of a King Conchobor and the prodigious warriors of the Red Branch, the most celebrated of whom was Cú Chulainn, called the Hound of Ulster. The best-known tale of this cycle is the Táin Bó Cúailnge, which recounts the invasion of Ulster
by Queen Medb of Connaught in pursuit of a legendary bull. Eventually the men of Connacht are repulsed by the Ulstermen and their spectacular hero, Cú Chulainn.

**Important Dates**

- The First Home Rule Bill - 1886
- The Easter Rising - 1916
- The Government of Ireland Act was created – 1920
- Anglo-Irish Agreement – 1985
- Downing Street Declaration – 1993

**Population**

Northern Ireland has the smallest population of the countries of the United Kingdom. The population is fairly static, currently 1,578,000, because migration roughly balances the natural increase. The birth rate is much higher than in Great Britain. Consequently Northern Ireland has a young population, with relatively fewer older people. The population is unevenly distributed, sparse over the uplands, heavy in the valleys, and greater in the east than in the west.

**Currency**

Northern Ireland's currency is the British pound divided into one hundred pence (100p). Notes are issued in values of 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 pounds. Coins are issued in values of 1 pound, 50p, 20p, 10p, 5p, 2p and 1p. 1 U.S. dollar is currently equal to 0.68 pounds.
**Education**

The social services in Northern Ireland are closely patterned on those of the United Kingdom. This is quite apparent in Northern Ireland’s educational system. The 1947 Education Act parallels the 1944 act of England and Wales, but its implementation is hampered by the traditional tenacious denominational control of education, which the population is generally reluctant to abandon. Northern Ireland has two universities, Queen’s University of Belfast, established in 1845 and the University of Ulster, established in 1984 by the merger of the New University of Ulster and the Ulster Polytechnic.

**Language**

The most common language used in Northern Ireland is English, though recent census figures indicate that 79,000 people are capable of fluently speaking, reading, and writing the ancient Celtic language of Irish. Additionally, 100,000 people can speak Ulster-Scots, a variant of the Scots language spoken in Scotland. This variety of linguistics shows deep cultural relationships between the two parts of Ireland, as well as with the rest of British Isles.

**Religion**

About two-fifths of the population of Northern Ireland is Roman Catholic, while more than one-fifth is Presbyterian, with less than one-fifth Episcopalian. Methodists and members of other sects make up most of the remainder. The distribution of Catholics and Protestants is very uneven. In country districts the Protestants are in a majority in the north and east. Elsewhere they are in a minority, though fairly highly localized. Most towns have a Protestant majority. This is the case in Belfast, where Catholics
make up less than one-third of the population. Towns outside of Belfast, such as Newry and Londonderry, are more than half Roman Catholic. In the towns there is a high degree of segregation of the sects, and mixing is minimal.

**Agriculture**

Northern Ireland has a vast amount of agricultural resources, which play a major part in its economy. It is primarily a country of farmers; however, this began to change in the 20\(^{th}\) century. The number of farms has decreased while the average farm size has increased. There has been a great increase in the amount of tractors and harvesters used and almost all farms now have electricity. Frequent rainfall coupled with high humidity make arable farming difficult, but these conditions produce good grass and pasture for livestock which are the main source of farm income. Nearly all grassland is plowed and there is little rough grazing. Mixed farming is traditional, but there has recently been a movement towards specialization. Potatoes, barley, wheat, and oats are principal crops while turnips are grown and fed to livestock. Grass seed and seed potato production are an important part of Northern Ireland’s exports. To the south of Lough Neagh, the landscape is utilized for apple growing and market gardening.

**Trade**

Northern Ireland’s economy is integrated with that of the United Kingdom. Trade is dominated by imports from and exports to other parts of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is an industrialized country with manufactured goods making up a large part of its exports. Engineering, shipbuilding, vehicle manufacture, textiles, food and beverage processing, and clothing are some of its major industries. Northern Ireland is lacking in mineral resources and it must depend on imported coal and oil for power.
Food

Northern Ireland has some of the finest, freshest food available in the British Isles. Although it is renowned for its seafood, the people there also enjoy beef and lamb. There is also an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables available. Many of the dishes found in Northern Ireland are very rich and heavy and will leave one feeling quite satisfied. One of Northern Ireland’s most famous dishes is a fried combination of bacon, sausage, eggs, potatoes, and white pudding served with strong tea and wheat. This is primarily a breakfast dish but popular at any time of day with a few additions like chops, steak, kidneys, liver, tomatoes and mushrooms. Northern Ireland also boasts many pubs, wineries, and coffee shops that are bound to quench any visitors thirst.

Landmarks

Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland is home to many landmarks including The City Hall, Botanic Gardens, The Albert Memorial, The Ulster Hall, Queens University, and Waterfront Hall. The city is also well known for its shopping area in Donegall Place. Northern Ireland also has many historic castles as well as some of the most spectacular landscapes in the world. There are many miles of unspoiled sandy beaches all around the coast, five of which are European blue flag beaches. The magnificent Giant’s
Causeway is Northern Ireland's most famous landmark. This site has thousands of six-sided basalt columns and many rock formations such as the "Wishing Chair".

Deanna R. Bapst