

# Reviews

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## 'There are Things Stronger Than Parliamentary Majorities' (Andrew Bonar Law, 1912)

Alan O'Day:  
*Irish Home Rule 1867–1921*  
(Manchester University Press, 1998)  
Reviewed by Tony Little

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Devolution has been the policy of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat parties for more than a century, and is so ingrained in the party that its origins and strange history are often forgotten. An argument can be made that in the form of home rule for Ireland it was a policy that almost destroyed the Liberal Party and that it was an accident of parliamentary circumstances rather than a natural outcome of Liberal philosophy.

Ireland was the last nation formally to join the United Kingdom, and union with Britain never appears to have sat comfortably with the majority of the population. Union was a reaction to the rebellion of 1798 and, at intervals thereafter idealistic but inept revolutionaries unsuccessfully attempted to cut the chains. While sometimes led by high-minded and even upper-class Protestants, these uprisings drew whatever strength they had from the dissatisfaction, poverty and desperation of the Catholic peasants.

Strangely it was the failure of the Fenian outrages in 1867 which acted as the catalyst for change. A campaign to secure clemency for Fenians suffering long prison terms overlapped with a reaction among respectable Catholics towards a non-violent constructive constitutional form of nationalism. Meeting them part-way, in 1868, a new Liberal government under Gladstone, with a self-proclaimed

mission 'to pacify Ireland', adopted a policy initially of disestablishment of the Anglican Church of Ireland, and later of land reform.

From the conjunction of the forces in Ireland emerged the Home Rule party under Isaac Butt. While it made progress in winning seats in Ireland, its impact at Westminster was limited until Joseph Biggar and Charles Stewart Parnell developed obstructionism. They exploited the then easy-going rules of the Commons to slow down the pace of English business and highlight the needs of Ireland. Parnell replaced Butt as the leader of the party and in 1885 the party won (just) the balance of power in the Commons. The Home Rule party won the vast majority of seats in Ireland, including a majority in Ulster, and one in Liverpool.

In the ensuing crisis, Gladstone both adopted home rule as Liberal policy and defined its structure. Until Gladstone sat down with his cabi-

net to draft the first Home Rule Bill, it had been an aspiration for the Irish but untested in England, and had no need for a concrete form. The process of definition crystallised all the difficulties, which have ever since bedevilled the Irish peace process and the introduction of devolution anywhere in Britain. What powers should be devolved? What reserved for the imperial parliament? Should there be representation at Westminster? Should it be more closely related to the size of the electorate? Should the representatives of the devolved countries have the right to speak and vote on the affairs of the other countries at Westminster? How should the rights of minorities within the community be protected?

While not accepting Gladstone's proposals as fixing 'the boundary to the march of a nation', Parnell supported the bill. For the majority of Liberals such devolution chimed in with trusting the people. However, about one third of Liberal MPs on the radical left and Whig right of the party not only harboured prejudices about obstructive and rebellious Irish, but saw the bill as heralding the break-up of an Empire then nearing its peak. At times it is hard to see the distinction drawn, especially by Radical Unionists, between schemes of local government reform which they would have accepted and the proposals Gladstone made, but it should not be forgotten that in 1886, there was no county council system as we know it today. Irish local government was provided by a series of grand juries dominated by an elite of Protestant landowners.

The break with the Liberal Unionists was fatal to the bill. Continued advocacy of home rule gave Gladstone and the remainder of the party a sense of purpose over the following years, but guaranteed that there would be no reunion. This put paid to the prospect of Liberals governing for the best part of twenty years.

Alan O'Day argues that there were two kinds of home ruler – the moral and the material. For the moral home rulers, the appeal was

primarily to achieve a form of nationhood for Ireland to which she was entitled. For many, this emotional and spiritual ambition was secondary to the reforms required to give the Irish people the day-to-day government which reflected their own needs and agenda. The party leadership worked on both ambitions and it is this which differentiates the party from any Irish predecessors. Even short of achieving a parliament for Ireland, the party could always put proposals forward and sometimes achieve successes which met the needs of the electorate for land reform, better education, economic aid and local government.

This service function sustained the Home Rule party through the crisis of the fall of Parnell, the frustration of the 1892 Gladstone government and the growing disengagement of the Liberals from home rule that followed. Nationalists were able to exploit the alliance of the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists to secure and improve the lot of the Irish tenants. Despite splits within its ranks and the growth of Sinn Fein, with its more militant philosophy of boycotting Westminster, the Home Rule party was ready and able to exploit the hung parliament which followed the elections of 1910 and the removal of the Lords' veto.

O'Day provides another useful analytical tool by enumerating the eight groups each of whom was vital to the legitimacy of self-government. These included, naturally, the Catholic population of Ireland, and the adoption of the plan by one of the major British parties, support of the press and the consent of the British public. The plan needed to pass both the Houses of Parliament. 'Southern Irish Unionist opposition had to be moderated; and, finally, Ulster Unionist interests needed to be satisfied.' Catholic support was sustained, but the first two attempts in 1886 and 1892 failed the parliamentary and English public support hurdles.

Strangely, the position of the Ulster Protestants was not recognised by Gladstone in 1886, though Lord Randolph Churchill saw the poten-

tial for exploiting their fears, and Gladstone was prepared to give some protection to the religious minority overall. By 1892, the Ulster Unionists were better prepared, and in 1912 the support given to their intransigence by the Conservatives brought the greatest crisis for parliamentary government since the civil war. The even greater European crisis of 1914 put the Irish debate on hold, though with home rule on the statute book but not implemented.

The Great War changed many things, not least the landscape of Irish politics. The 1916 rebellion resurrected the military strategy. The introduction of conscription for Ireland in 1918 delivered the election into the hands of Sinn Fein. Those of its members not in prison met in Dublin rather than Westminster. But, perversely, their boycott allowed the British parties at Westminster to re-

solve the Ulster problem and grant dominion status to the rest of Ireland in 1922. It was a messy solution with few friends for which we are still paying a price, but for most practical purposes Ireland had ceased to be of contention in Britain.

O'Day's book provides a full coverage of each stage in the development of home rule. Written in the form of a textbook, it also comes with a clear chronology, potted biographies of each of the main characters and an assortment of relevant brief documents for students to use as evidence. However, the general reader should not be dissuaded by this structure. It is a clear and enjoyable read, written from the perspective of the Irish but not in any partisan way. This difference in viewpoint provides a valuable counterpoint to the traditional English Liberal historiography.

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## Three Acres and a Cow

David Stemp:

*Three Acres and a Cow: The life and works of Eli Hamshire*

*Reviewed by John James*

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When I saw this title on the bookshelf I guessed it would contain at least some kind of reference to land reform and poverty; I reached for my wallet; and I've not been disappointed. The book, written by the subject's great-great-grandson, is an ideal purchase for anyone interested in mid-to late nineteenth century history.

The book begins with some of the Hamshire family background and genealogy and is itself full of interesting anecdotes such as: 'had to pay sixpence for the redemption of English captives taken by the Turkish pirates'. It's Eli and his works, however, that really interested me. Eli Hamshire was born on Christmas Day 1834, at Ewhurst in Surrey, into a family of yeoman farmers down on their luck. He was largely self-

educated and became, amongst other things, a carrier. He was a thrifty chap: he was renting a field at the age of fourteen, and if he came upon a toll bridge he would unhitch the horse, lead it over and then pull the cart across himself to save a penny. At the age of twenty-nine he married Rebecca, who brought a modest fortune with her; it was not squandered. He also brewed his own beer, after falling out with the local