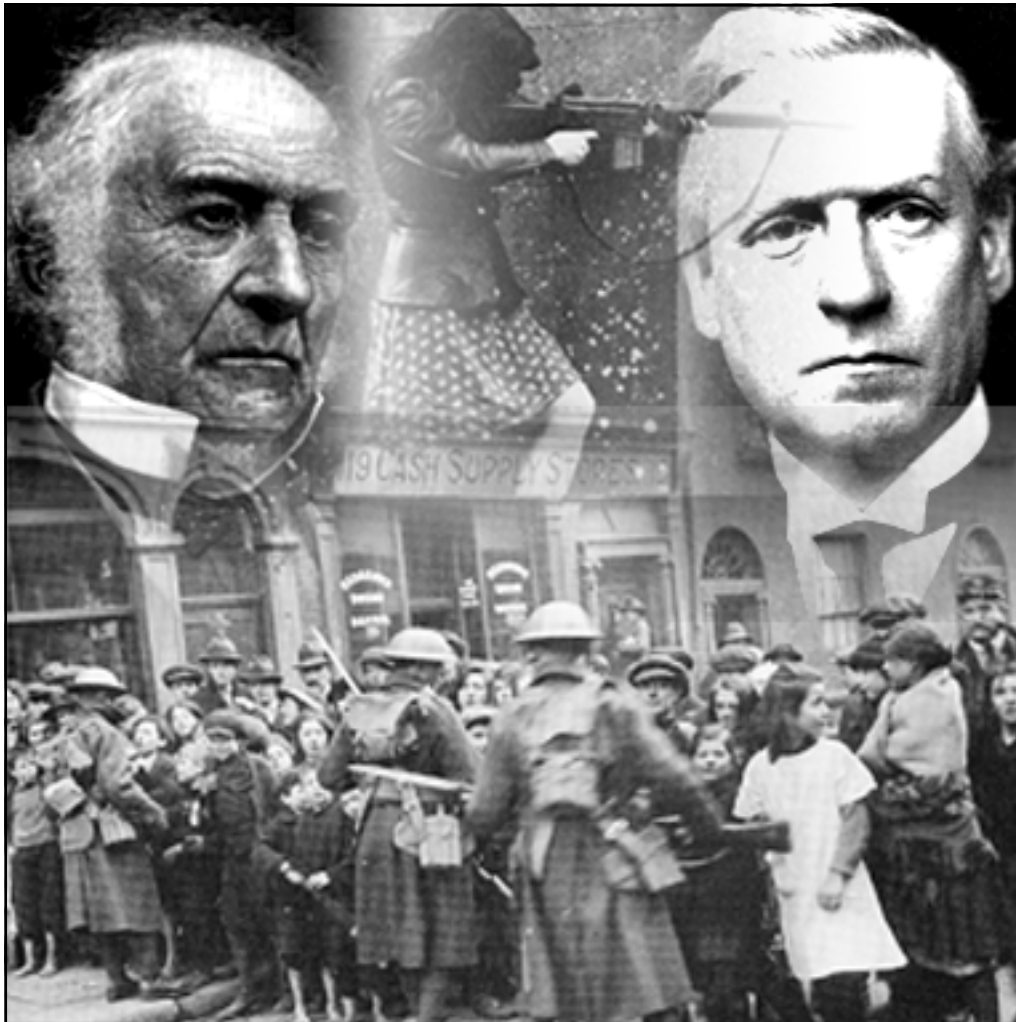


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# Liberal Democrat

# HISTORY



## Liberals and Ireland

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**Lord John Russell and the Irish Catholics**

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Ian Machin

**An Intractable Problem? Gladstone and Irish Home Rule**

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Roy Douglas

**Lloyd George and the Partition of Ireland**

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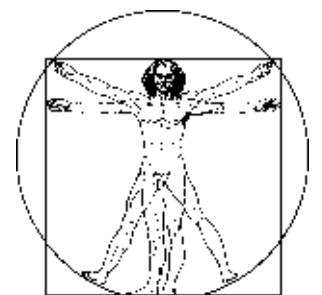
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Liberal Democrat History Group

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# Liberals and Ireland

The Northern Ireland Assembly has now been in place since 1998. A power-sharing Executive is governing. The major campaigns of republican and loyalist terrorism are relatively quiescent and relations between North and South and between Unionists and Nationalists are on a wholly new footing. This has all come at the end of a generation in British politics where the three major parties at Westminster have held to a largely agreed approach. While there were minor differences of emphasis, Northern Ireland has not been a matter of substantial inter-party dispute or even debate over the thirty years of 'the Troubles'. It was not always so. Attitudes towards the Irish Question were for long time a defining characteristic of the two major parties in British politics. For the Tories it was a matter of keeping the place under control. For those of a Liberal disposition it was a problem to be resolved. This timely collection of papers looks at how Liberals have approached Ireland and her problems.

Perversely I would read the last paper in the collection first. Michael Steed's review of Stephen Howe's *Ireland and Empire* demonstrates how the colonial paradigm is an inadequate basis for understanding the relationship of Britain and Ireland. Instead he identifies key moments as 'missed opportunities' when the relationship went wrong, when it might so easily have been otherwise. One such moment was the failure of Grattan's Parliament, analysed by Mark Pack in his article on Charles James Fox. A second is considered by both Alan O'Day and – in detail – Ian Machin, namely Gladstone's inability to carry his 1886 home rule bill and the split in the Liberal party which ensued, leaving the party in the political wilderness for twenty years, aside from his last short ministry. And a third is described by Jeremy Smith in his article on Asquith. We forget that that much admired, yet much criticised, Prime Minister did actually place home rule on the statute book, only for his government's unnecessarily harsh reaction to the Easter rising of 1916 to drive constitutional Nationalism into the arms of Sinn Féin in a matter of weeks.

I was unaware of the extent and longevity of Lord John Russell's interest and commitment to Ireland before reading Jonathan Parry's sympathetic article, which shows his prescience in addressing – albeit unsuccessfully – the power of the churches in Irish society. Iain Sharpe's review of Peter Gray's *Famine, Land and Politics* describes the more conventional memory of Russell as the Prime Minister who failed to resolve the problems brought about by the failure of the potato crop in 1846.

But the century is dominated by W. E. Gladstone for whom Ireland was a mission. He pursued the question with evangelical zeal. First he tried coercion. When this failed he tried reform, especially land reform. Then he tried doing business with Parnell, but this too was unsuccessful and he resorted to the repression of the Coercion Acts. Finally he turned to Home Rule. Perhaps one of the reasons why Ireland became such a destructive experience for Gladstone was that he saw it and treated it as one homogenous country – a small country like Norway where he had spent a holiday in 1885, becoming, through the experience, a convert to Home Rule. Tony Little's review of the *Gladstone Centenary Essays* describes other influences that were also at work, including his experience of Egypt and his response to Edmund Burke's writings on America and Ireland. The terms devolution and subsidiarity are more commonly used and very widely accepted in the new Europe, and the principle that decisions should be taken by those people responsible who are as close as possible to those concerned is now a fundamental liberal principle espoused across a wide political spectrum. Why then should Gladstone and the Liberals have broken their back in attempting to implement this principle? Were they simply too far ahead of their time?

The experience of the first two Home Rule Bills made the Liberals more wary of the Irish question, but it was inescapable. When it returned to plague Asquith and Lloyd George they realized that while Ireland is of course one country in a physical sense, its social and political geography is much more complex. This was the beginning of a realisation that it is not necessarily nation states but communities that

are the key to identity and self-government. Communities have a complex social, cultural and economic definition rather than being a simple matter of physical geography. It was this greater sophistication as well as pressures from the Irish Unionists (both Liberal and Conservative) and the chicanery of the Tories generally which led them to explore partition as an option. Roy Douglas describes how (Welsh) Liberal wizardry – for which read pragmatism – was applied to the problem and in a remarkably short time the partitionist settlement came into being. Neither side in Ireland wanted it, but both could live with it, and did, for fifty years.

In recent decades the Lloyd George 1921 settlement has had a bad press, not least amongst liberals, while the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement is lauded on all sides. Is this fair? The main components of the 1998 Agreement are as follows. There is an acceptance that the future constitutional position of Northern Ireland should be a matter for the people who live there, and this recognition is to be maintained by the British Government and has been reflected in the Irish Constitution. New co-operative institutions have been established within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between the United Kingdom and the Republic of

Ireland. A series of measures have been put in place to protect human rights and equality of opportunity. There has been a new start to policing and the administration of justice. The transition from conflict to stability should require measures on prisoners, the decommissioning of weapons and demilitarisation, all of which have come about in varying degrees. The Agreement has been validated by the people of the island of Ireland, both North and South.

By comparison, the Treaty of 1921 gave Dominion status to the twenty-six Southern counties but maintained some links with the United Kingdom. The Government of Ireland Act 1920 had already created a parliament in Belfast for Northern Ireland because the people who lived there had made clear their wish to opt out of a united Ireland. The new parliament was elected by a proportional voting system. The Council of Ireland was to create a North-South institution. While international human rights instruments were still some way in the future, there were efforts to heal the community divisions such as the attempts by Lord Londonderry to develop an integrated education system. Thus, while not every measure of the 1998 Agreement is identifiable in the instruments of the 1920s, there are remarkable similarities.

#### Provisional IRA in Belfast



What then went wrong? There are at least three elements. First, as with the unsuccessful 1973 Heath/Whitelaw Sunningdale initiative, the 1921 Treaty emerged after a relatively short but intense period of violence. The former Taoiseach, John Bruton, has argued in a recent Princeton lecture that armed action, even as a tool of an otherwise justifiable struggle for independence, has had in the long term a negative outcome in Ireland. What seems clear is that in both 1921 and 1973 not enough was done to deal with the sequelae of the violence.

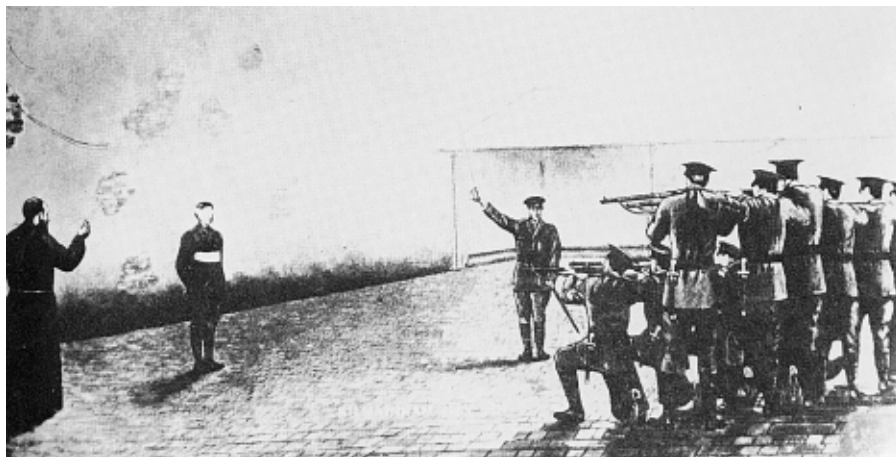
Secondly, the focus in 1921 was on creating acceptable arrangements, but in those days the process of bringing people to accept outcomes was less well understood. We have come a long way in the understanding of 'process' since then. Liberals always love a good debate on the constitutional minutiae which are the content of settlements, but while these matters are of importance the process by which people reach and accommodate themselves to an outcome is the key to success in conflict resolution. The process that led to the Belfast Agreement began after the Westminster election in 1987 with the so-called 'talks about Talks'. While some would rightly quote even earlier dates as seminal there is little argument but that a long period of work is necessary in most successful 'processes' of this nature.

There is also a third element, which is specifically liberal. The early 1920s saw the demise of political liberalism. In other realms the liberal ideas of people like Beveridge and Keynes were taken up but misinterpreted by non-liberals in government. I believe there is a legitimate argument that the subsequent Troubles of 1968 – 1998 were in part the long-term result of a failure fully to implement the settlement Lloyd George had put into place. One could hardly hold the Tories responsible for they simply continued with their traditional misguided approach. It was the neglect of Northern Ireland by the British Labour Party which demonstrated that in this area as in so many others they were unworthy inheritors of the Liberal mantle. The Southern counties moved to independence, became a republic, left the Commonwealth and stayed out of

NATO. The Council of Ireland never functioned. Berkley Farr's article on Northern Ireland from 1920 to 1970 shows how proportional representation was dismantled in the North and the movement for integrated schooling was crushed by church interests. The alienation of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland was ignored by the political establishments in both London and Dublin and political life stagnated.

A new Ireland had to wait until the tide of liberalism flowed again, both at home and abroad. Robert Bell's review of Gordon Gillespie's *Albert McElroy* shows how the Ulster Liberal Party was briefly able to take advantage of this, but the future of liberalism in Northern Ireland was not to lie with the ULP. Denis Loretto's personal memoir describes the foundation of the Alliance Party – now the ULP's de facto successor – and conveys much of the atmosphere of being a political activist during the Troubles.

One important theme unites all of these papers, which is again topical after the events of 11 September. David Blunkett's recent anti-terrorist legislation lies in a direct line with the similar initiatives of the Gladstone Cabinet's 1881 Coercion Bill, the Asquith Coalition's response to the Easter Rising, Lloyd George's use of the Black and Tans, and – more recently – Roy Jenkins' 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act while he was Home Secretary. To what extent can a liberal society set aside its normal conventions of democracy and justice in order to contain a violence that acknowledges neither? There is no doubt that liberal democracy must be defended against attacks from without and within. The difficult question is how to conduct that defence, and liberals often find it a challenge to strike the right note. Some liberals have a profound struggle with any use of force and I am reminded of the exasperated remark about one Northern Ireland Secretary that 'he argued with his conscience over every decision – and the result was always a draw'. That sort of uncertainty is however scarcely less disastrous than the alternative tendency to overreact, often nourishing the very opposition that one is trying to suppress. There is not a simple answer to this problem but in the post-Sep-



Executions after the Easter Rising, 1916

tember 11 world it is one of the most important questions confronting us. A serious study of the successes and failures of repression in Ireland would be of wider value to those who are asking how liberal democracy can be defended. For myself, I am certainly convinced that the abandonment of our principles is not the right way to defend them, but I am reminded also of the Biblical injunction to be 'wise as serpents as well as harmless as doves'.

I return to the theme of 'missed opportunities'. I believe that the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement will be looked back upon by historians as another seminal moment in the history of Britain and Ireland. But there are likely to be immense dangers on the way. For Republican and Nationalist the Agreement represents a process which is continuing, that opens the way to the possibility of a united Ireland. For the Unionist it represents a process that has now ended. 'Concessions' were made in exchange for promises from the other side with regard to a cessation of the threat of violence and a commitment to make Northern Ireland work as a valid political entity. Perceptions and what is happening on the ground will be all important. The perception that Sinn Fein have been the 'winners' in a process that was intended to be even-handed has alienated Unionists and is worrying Nationalists. And on the ground the recent demonstrations over school attendance in north Belfast, where a previously Unionist area is now evenly split between the communities, are a sharp reminder of the impact of demography as Protestant (Unionist) numbers decline in relation to

Catholic. This will fuel the Unionist perception of themselves as a community under threat and has the potential to provoke Loyalist violence.

The challenge for liberals will be to create the conditions in which both Unionist and Nationalist will be able in due course to make an informed decision, uninfluenced by violence, as to whether their future is best aligned with a new and united Ireland, with a Northern Ireland that remains British but that fully and unambiguously accommodates its Irish heritage, or with some combination of the two, possibly within the framework of the European Union.

Political liberalism has now risen to a new high-water mark with the success of the Liberal Democrats in the 2001 Westminster election, the Lib-Lab coalition governments in Scotland and Wales, and the recent actions of the Alliance Party in respect of David Trimble's re-election as First Minister which arguably saved the Good Friday Agreement and the power-sharing administration in Belfast. Surely it is no mere coincidence of history that Ireland has made the greatest strides in addressing its ancient feud when liberalism has been on the move.

This collection of essays charts the fascinating story of British Liberalism and Ireland and is timely evidence that we will be better able to face the challenges that lie ahead when we can understand the history that has gone before.

*Lord (John) Alderdice is Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and President of the British Group of Liberal International. He is a former leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland.*

Dr Mark Pack examines the critical period in Irish and British history during which many of the seeds of the present troubles were sown.

# Charles James Fox, the Repeal of Poynings' Law, and the Act of Union

The repeal of Poynings' Law in 1782 brought about a short-lived period of real devolved power for the Irish parliament which lasted until the 1801 Act of Union which, despite its name, was in effect a restoration of English power over Ireland.

Poynings' Law was named after Sir Edward Poynings (1459 – 1521), a supporter of Henry VII who was sent to Ireland on his behalf in 1494. He summoned a parliament in Drogheda, which passed a variety of laws strengthening the English grip on Ireland, including the eponymous law. It made any Irish parliament clearly subservient to the English and, at its heart, it stipulated that:

No parliament be holden hereafter in the said land, but at such season as the King's lieutenant and council there first do certify.<sup>1</sup>

It meant that the Privy Council could control when and if any parliament met in Ireland. In addition, the Privy Council had to give permission for the introduction of any new legislation and the supremacy and applicability of legislation from the Westminster Parliament to Ireland was also asserted. In subsequent years the law was frequently unpopular not just with Catholics, but also with Protestants. For Catholics its unpopularity was more obvious as it was an extension of English control over Ireland. But for Irish Protestants it was also a cause of protest, as it meant power rested in England rather than with them. This particularly applied to Presbyterians (rather than Anglicans) who were also in search of an end to the religious discrimination and restrictions that afflicted both themselves and Catholics.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there had been limited English interest in Ireland. There were occasional brief bursts, usually marked by an attempt to impose a particular social order on the island, which faded away. The main English interests were in protecting the dominance of the Crown and protecting Ireland (and so England) from invasion. A similar pattern was seen with English settlement, which came in bursts, and was largely motivated by a desire to secure Ireland.

Following Henry VIII's denial of Papal supremacy and the break between England and the Papacy, Catholics were still largely willing to acknowledge the temporal authority of the monarchy. However, their unwillingness to acknowledge its spiritual authority meant they were increasingly excluded from public life.

Those two centuries did not pass without violence, in particular the intervention of Cromwell's army in 1641 and the war with the Jacobites in 1690 – 91. These left a delicate three-way political struggle between Irish Catholics, Irish Protestants and English Protestants. Irish Protestants were keen to strengthen their grip on Irish power, and used Catholic unrest as a reason. They were often suspicious of the English as being a soft touch on Irish unrest, but in turn English politicians were frequently willing to pass anti-Catholic measures, such as the removal of the vote from Catholic freeholders in 1729, in order to keep Irish Protestants happy.

It was the struggle for American Independence that returned the question of the balance of power between Ireland and England to centre stage. The

war brought together not only many of the Catholic and Protestant opponents of Poyning's Law in Ireland; it also provided a more interested audience in Ireland for their views and more willingness amongst the members of the Westminster Parliament to respond.

For the Irish, of whatever denomination, the American war also brought economic hardship through the loss of one of the few significant foreign markets for Irish produce. The late eighteenth century population boom that was causing significant strains in rural society fuelled complaints about the levels of taxation and trade restrictions. As a result demands for legislative independence increased – so that an Irish parliament could set different rules for Ireland.

And for Irish Protestants in particular, there was an obvious common cause with the Americans who were fighting for independence, as they too were seeking to loosen the shackles of rule by England. Both were hostile to the government ministers in London, critical of royal and government corruption and demanded cuts in taxation. More power for the Irish Parliament would, they believed, mean lower taxes, fewer placemen and less restrictions on trade.

For the English, the French involvement in the American War of Independence heightened fears of Ireland being used as a back door through which England could be invaded. There were also concerns that the sequence of events in America might be repeated in Ireland, with Ireland too slipping from English rule.

The Irish Volunteer Movement exploited these fears. It was founded in the late 1770s and was very much a Protestant movement – driven by the powers of Protestant landowners over their tenants and by their hostility to the French – a trait that was rarely matched amongst Catholics, for many of whom the French were a possible ally and source of relief from Protestant rule. The Movement had its roots in genuine fears of invasion from previous decades. Indeed, in 1760 a small number of French troops had landed at Carrickfergus. In response, local farmers armed and organised themselves. The sight of this organised opposition

quickly persuaded the French to abandon their plans, and retreat to their ships and back to France.

This victory inspired the creation of volunteer forces around the country, fuelled by a mix of genuine desire to oppose invasion, the social cachet available to landowners who took part and the desire to use the organisation to distract its members from other activities – drilling weavers being preferable to rioting weavers. War with America and renewed hostilities with France meant that the threat of invasion, and the popularity of moves to counter them, revived.

The political threat implicit in the Volunteer Movement was reinforced by the reduction in the number of soldiers stationed in Ireland in response to the demands of the war. By 1781 around 90,000 volunteers were under arms, but by 1782 the number of regular troops in the island had fallen to just 5,000.

The distractions of war also strengthened the position of the Volunteer Movement in other ways. English politicians generally were more ready than usual to concede to Protestant Irish demands simply because they felt they could not risk unrest in Ireland. For many Whigs in particular the Volunteer Movement was a noble, even necessary cause. In their political theology the people had the right to resort to force to preserve liberty against a dictatorship. This was an extension of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 – the people (possibly with the threat of force) had the right to exert themselves to enforce the protection of liberty. This belief resulted in views being expressed which perhaps today might more naturally sound like those of the American National Rifle Association rather than those of liberal politicians. Tierney, a later leader of the party, argued in the early nineteenth century that,

If ... an Englishman was not to be allowed to have weapons for self-defence in his possession, a most grave case indeed must be made out ... [There was an] established constitutional principle that a man had a right to have arms for his own self defence.<sup>2</sup>

Charles James Fox, one of the leading Whigs from the late 1770s through to



Charles James Fox (1749 – 1806)

his death in 1806, had a close interest in Irish events. His uncle, the Duke of Leinster, was a leading volunteer and the parallels and links with America drew him in as America was the source of much of his opposition to the King's government. In 1779 he asked,

What stripped Ireland of her troops? Was it not the American war? What brought on the hostilities of France and put Ireland in fear of an invasion? Was it not the American war? What gave Ireland the opportunity of establishing a powerful and illegal army? Certainly the American war!<sup>3</sup>

Despite his use of the phrase 'illegal army' he was happy on many occasions to support the Volunteer Movement. With his flamboyant nature, Fox was often attracted by the whiff of revolution, and spoke of how:

If one branch of the legislature becomes subservient to another, the people are at liberty to constitute themselves a new legislature.<sup>4</sup>

Force, when deployed against dictatorship, was acceptable to Fox:

The Irish Associations have been called illegal: legal or illegal, he declared he entirely approved of them. He approved of that manly determination which, in the dernier resort, flew to arms in order to obtain deliverance.<sup>5</sup>

For him, liberty relied on the willingness in extremis to use force; it depended on a people that:

Flies to arms in order to obtain deliverance ... as a defence against the possible or actual abuse of power,

political treachery, and the arts and intrigues of government.<sup>6</sup>

This was because force was to Fox a necessary bulwark against an oppressive monarchy. Restricting monarchical power was a key theme running through his personal political beliefs, and indeed had been one of the reasons for his becoming a Whig in the first place.<sup>7</sup> He believed in concessions on Irish issues to pacify Ireland – ‘unwilling subjects were little better than enemies’<sup>8</sup> – and as a result was often appealed to by Irish politicians such as Henry Grattan.

Grattan (1746 – 1820) was a lawyer and one of the best orators of his generation. He joined the Irish Parliament in 1775 and two years later struck up a friendship with Fox. Grattan campaigned for greater independence for the Irish Parliament, including the repeal of Poynings’ Law, which would open the road to tax and trade policies more amenable to him. Though this was an important source of support for his views, at their heart they were also driven by a strong belief in the rights of Ireland to have more say in her own affairs. He also, like Fox, supported a more liberal policy towards Catholics.

During 1779 tensions in Ireland rose with the congruence of the expanding Volunteer Movement, a stagnant economy and the resulting resentment at the restrictions in place on Irish trade. A free Irish parliament, with the ability to see its own trade rules, seemed the answer. For many Whigs in the Westminster Parliament, these views sat neatly with their own opposition to the King’s government, which they criticised as ineffective, governing wrongly and free of appropriate checks.

The 1779 crisis eased significantly in December when the Prime Minister, North, made considerable concessions to the demands of the Protestant Irish. Unsurprisingly, Fox and the other opposition in the London Parliament were only muted in their welcome for these concessions as they came from a deeply hostile opponent. Irish Protestants in turn were made suspicious by this lukewarm reaction – did it mean that the previous support

by Whigs for their cause was only motivated by an opposition to the King and Prime Minister rather than a genuine belief in it? The next major test came in 1782 with another upsurge of opposition. Representatives from the Ulster Volunteer regiments assembled on 15 February 1782 at Dungannon, where they resolved:

That a claim of any body of men, other than the King, Lords, and Commons of Ireland, to make laws to bind this kingdom, is unconstitutional, illegal, and a grievance.

This resolution was penned by Grattan, who also wrote two others that were adopted – one for limitation of the Mutiny Act and one for a more liberal policy towards Catholics. The meeting also reaffirmed its belief in the need to protect rights by recourse to arms, if necessary: ‘A citizen by learning the use of arms does not abandon any of his civil rights.’ Three other provinces – Leinster, Munster, and Connaught – saw similar meetings and declarations in quick succession, and by the time the Irish Parliament met in Dublin on 16 April 1782 the appearance of regiments of armed volunteers on the streets of the capital meant that an armed revolt was in effect threatened. It was, though, only a moderate threat – the emphasis continued on concessions for Catholics and on violence only as the last resort.

An unconnected event provided the opportunity for the threats to be played out peacefully and swiftly. Further setbacks in the war with America procured the fall of North’s administration and his replacement by Rockingham’s Whig ministry with Fox as Foreign Secretary. Irish pressure was required to overcome Fox’s initial instinct in his new position to play for time before committing to a course of action, but action was swift when it came. In just one day (17 May) Parliament passed a series of key measures – agreement that Ireland was not automatically bound to abide by its laws (this was done via the repeal of the Declaratory Act of 1719, 6 Geo I), the repeal of Poynings’ Law and limitations to the Mutiny Act.

Thus Irish legislative freedom was

achieved, with the concomitant weakening of the Westminster Parliament and the monarchy, which was just as important to Fox. But this legislative freedom was not accompanied by meaningful reform of the Parliament’s structure and mode of election. It continued to be dominated by a small number of large landowners, with a relatively small electorate and many pocket boroughs.

The concomitant of Parliamentary power being concentrated in so few hands was that there were few who were keen supporters of the Parliament. Even the revived volunteer movement in the 1790s was largely hostile to the Irish Parliament on these grounds. As a result, the Parliament was in a poor shape to withstand the strains following the revolution in France when Ireland was, once again, wracked by significant internal dissent and unrest. A broad alliance of forces therefore argued for Parliamentary union with the rest of the United Kingdom, believing that this would provide a governance structure more resilient to the threats of unrest and revolution. Even the leaders of the Catholic Church, hostile to the anti-Catholicism of much of the French revolution and those inspired by it, were prepared to support such an arrangement. Thus was inaugurated the 1801 Act of Union.

*Mark Pack is the Liberal Democrats’ Internet campaign manager. He has a doctorate in nineteenth century Yorkshire elections from the University of York*

- 1 *Statutes at Large*, Ireland, I, 44: 10 Henry VII, c. 4
- 2 D. Brack et al, *Great Liberal Speeches*, 2001, p. 39
- 3 1779. For the full speech see *Parl Hist XX* pp. 1116-28
- 4 S. Ayling, *Fox*, 1991, p. 72
- 5 L.G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox*, 1992, p. 35
- 6 *Parl Hist XX* pp. 1123-8. The *Morning Post* commented on this speech that, ‘Mr Fox in his parliamentary invocation to rebellion seems to strive as hard for a halter as any gentleman ever did in his desperate circumstances’.
- 7 His mother’s family had disapproved of his parents’ marriage. Siding with his parents, he had a strongly held opposition to restrictions on the rights of people to marry. When George III tried, via the Royal Marriage Bill, to restrict the rights of the monarch’s children to marry, Fox resigned from the government and began his long career in opposition to the monarch.
- 8 D. Powell, *Charles James Fox*, 1989, p. 124



1829 – 1852

Despite the Whig leader Lord John Russell's efforts to work for justice to Ireland, his policies ended mainly in failure. Dr Jonathan Parry explains why.

# Lord John Russell and the Irish Catholics

Lord John Russell was not only the major influence on parliamentary Liberal politics between 1830 and 1852, but was also the leading force in persuading the party to work for 'justice to Ireland' – a cause to which, like Gladstone later, he devoted much of his career. Indeed he made two fact-finding visits to Ireland in 1833 and 1848 (Gladstone made only one, in 1877). Ironically, however, his Irish policy ended mostly in failure. This article seeks to explain why.

Russell's core attitudes to Ireland came – like most of his attitudes – from his mentor, the Whig leader Charles James Fox, and from his father, the Sixth Duke of Bedford, who was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland during the 'Talents' ministry of 1806–07, the Whigs' only taste of power in the fifty-six years before 1830. The Whigs were committed to Catholic Emancipation. They believed that it was wrong and counterproductive for the state to impose a civil penalty on account of religious beliefs, and, specifically, that the Union with Ireland forced through in 1800 would not work unless Catholics had representation in the United Kingdom Parliament. Bedford's government of Ireland set out to conciliate the Catholics, while it was the whigs' refusal to abandon the principle of Catholic Emancipation that led to their dismissal by George III in 1807.

Russell, born in 1792, thus grew up in a party that was stuck in opposition because of its commitment to the principle of Emancipation and civil equality. Emancipation was finally granted in 1829, fifty years too late, according to him. The rule of the Protestant ascendancy had become too entrenched and too hated. If Catholics had been granted political status earlier, the subsequent lessening of tension would have encouraged landlords to reside on their estates and invest capital in economic modernisation. Russell's goal was the full assimilation of the Irish

Catholics into the United Kingdom, as a precursor to Ireland enjoying the economic and social progress that the mainland was experiencing. Russell was a vehement supporter of the Union. Notwithstanding the unfortunate legacy of Tory rule in Ireland, he believed that the state had the responsibility and the ability to secure good government there. The Union had replaced sectional rule in Ireland – that of the Protestant ascendancy landlords – with the possibility of disinterested national leadership. Russell's political philosophy gave a crucial role to the state as the arbiter between interests that would establish a mutually acceptable civic framework.<sup>1</sup> Thus he remained a strong critic of Protestant cliques and landlord evictions.

Russell's policy for Ireland between the Whigs' return to government in 1830 and his resignation as prime minister in 1852 was basically fivefold: First, to secure the confidence of the Catholic population by making many Catholic appointments to political and judicial office and the police force. Second, to use legislation to help to check the landlords' abuses of power and to force them to accept their responsibilities to their people. Third, to establish a dialogue with the representatives of Catholic opinion (just as the 1832 Reform Act required governments to pay more attention to legitimate political pressure groups on the mainland, Russellite politics required the emergence of clear leaders of Irish political opinion, formulating grievances so that the government could decide on a response). Fourth, to combine this with the firm implementation of the rule of law, indicating clearly that the maintenance of the Union was a non-negotiable principle. Fifth, to reach an accommodation between the state and the Irish Catholic Church by which the state would accept the Church's dominant standing among the Irish people and would give the Irish priesthood

more financial security, and with it the enhanced status that would encourage responsible political behaviour. Russell supported what was called concurrent endowment – the granting of financial support to Catholics along with Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

In combination, these five principles were meant to strengthen the power of, and respect for, the British state in Ireland through an informal alliance with the leaders of political and religious opinion. The idea was that this would encourage the leaders of Catholic Ireland to appreciate the benefits of Union, and check the evil that political agitators and narrow-minded priests could easily do. But the government also had a side of the bargain to keep, because it had to accept that Ireland had its own needs and could not be governed by the imposition of ‘English’ views. Since Russell and other Whigs prided themselves on their cosmopolitanism – on their understanding of the variety of governing approaches taken in European countries, in many of which the Catholic Church was a powerful force – this did not seem impossible.

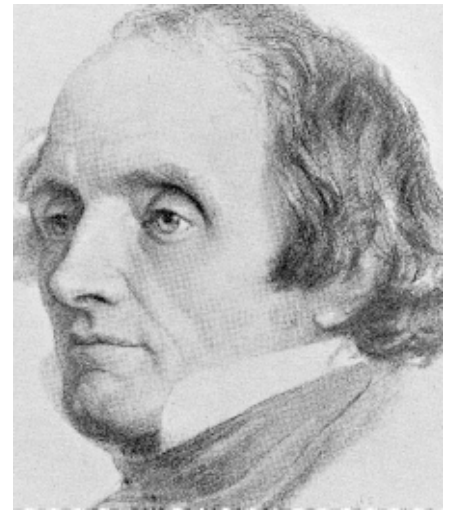
The first period of Russell’s influence in Irish policy was, broadly speaking, a success. The Whigs, increasingly known as Liberals, returned to government in 1835 in a tacit alliance with O’Connell – the so-called Lichfield House Compact. They upheld a policy on reform of the Anglican Church in Ireland that Russell had first set out in 1834 – the appropriation of its surplus revenues for general educational purposes. Russell’s declaration of 1834 had split British politics but had ensured that Ireland would be a major issue for Liberals for the rest of the 1830s. In March 1835 he proclaimed that misrule in Ireland had long ‘induced the people to consider themselves rather as the victims of tyranny, than the subjects of just Government’.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1835 and 1841 the Liberal government, of which Russell was Leader of the House of Commons and Home Secretary, appointed at least six Catholics to political office, reformed the Irish police force, bringing in many Catholics, and removed large numbers of Protestant magistrates – whom he famously called the ‘miserable monopo-

lising minority’. The Lord Lieutenant, Mulgrave, and his Dublin Castle officials assiduously identified themselves with aspects of Irish popular sentiment. Municipal reform in 1840 opened to Catholic leadership cities like Dublin (where O’Connell was elected Lord Mayor in 1841), although the House of Lords greatly limited the scope of the legislation. The introduction of a Poor Law in Ireland in 1838 made the landlords responsible for poor relief; it was hoped that this would force them to invest in agriculture in order to minimise their relief burdens. O’Connell wrote that the government was ‘conquering the “anti-Saxon” Spirit of Ireland’.<sup>3</sup> The number of MPs advocating Repeal of the Union fell sharply between 1835 and 1841.

Yet already government plans were being frustrated by Tory and Protestant opposition in Britain to Catholic influence in Ireland. Supposed Liberal sympathy for O’Connell was one of the two main reasons for the Tories’ revival that led them to victory at the general election of 1841. In the late 1830s the Lords were able to kill major legislation, most notably appropriation, with impunity, while Russell was unable to bring in his plan of 1838 to endow Catholic priests. Moreover, the very success of Liberal reforms left Irish MPs divided on their future direction. And once the Irish MPs were no longer agreed on a drive for clearly articulated reforms, this reduced their clout and made it even easier for British Protestant opinion to ignore Irish demands.

O’Connell’s death in 1847 made this problem worse. But by then, the difficulties of governing Ireland had been enormously exacerbated by the terrible tragedy of the potato famine of 1845 – 46. This was a tragedy that the government, now headed by Russell as prime minister after the fall of Peel in 1846, was inevitably ill-equipped to meet. The reappearance of the potato blight in August 1846 threw out government calculations that the temporary public works established under Peel could soon be phased out, so they were continued. But it was not administratively or politically feasible to expand the works to the extent required. Government and British public opinion assumed that one object of



Lord John Russell (1792–1878)

policy should be to force the landlords to take more responsibility for the relief of their tenants. This concern to avoid pouring money into the landlords’ pockets helps to explain opposition to some of the relief schemes floated over the next two years, such as assisted emigration. Policy disputes made legislation problematical, though in the end in 1847 the scope of the Poor Law was greatly widened and state-subsidised soup kitchens were established on a large scale. Three million people were being fed from them by the summer. However, the Poor Law machinery was not adequate for the burden that the government required it to bear, especially in poorer districts where rates could not be collected.

British public opinion reacted to the plight of Ireland in a way that to modern minds seems unacceptably unsympathetic. This negative response must be viewed in the context of a long-existing critique of high taxation, combined with a particular suspicion of excessive poor relief to the ‘undeserving’, and a heightened anxiety that dictated the need to reduce government expenditure because of the depression of 1847–48. Indeed the banking crisis of 1847 was widely blamed on ‘extravagant’ expenditure on the Irish, whose landlords, it was felt, should be digging deeper into their own pockets. *The Times* articulated standard prejudices when it spoke of the ‘innate indolence’ of the people there. The last straw was the failed Young Ireland rebellion of July 1848, widely seen as a spectacular ingratitude for past concessions. Even a

powerful government could not have ignored such a mood, but Russell had no parliamentary majority and was dependent for support on the most vehement advocates of *laissez-faire*, Peelites and radicals. As it was, the government had to introduce four Budgets in 1848 before parliament would agree on a taxation policy. In the circumstances, extra relief was politically impossible, and this was disastrous given that the potato crop again partially failed in 1848 and 1849. The influence of *laissez-faire* ideology on some government ministers added to the difficulty of implementing a generous relief policy, but the true cause, as Russell sadly remarked, 'lies deep in the breast of the British people'.

The dominance of anti-Irish attitudes was strengthened by the lack of a vocal and united Irish parliamentary force, to which British politicians would have to listen. Not for some years after 1847 would any Irish politician be able to create a common purpose out of diverse local concerns. With Irish lay leadership unfocused, the role of the Catholic Church assumed heightened importance. Bishops had lobbied the government in October 1847, in order to counter the anti-Irish polemics of the *Times*. But Protestant British suspicion of the ultimate loyalties of the Catholic priesthood was intense. The 1847 parliament was the most 'Protestant' of the nineteenth century, because of the electoral consequences of the debates about the Maynooth grant in 1845–46. When an Irish landlord, Denis Mahon, was assassinated in November 1847 shortly after apparently being denounced from the pulpit by a priest, British press hostility to the Catholic Church intensified. Moreover, in October 1847 the pope had condemned the mixed higher education colleges, the Queen's Colleges, set up by Peel's government in 1845.

Thus Russell's dream of conciliation in Ireland was diminishing in the face of ultra-Protestant hostility in England and Scotland from Churchmen and Dissenters, and from the growth, partly in reaction, of uncompromising Irish clerical vigour. The latter became particularly associated with Archbishop Paul Cullen, who was made Archbishop of Armagh in 1849 after nearly thirty

years' residence in Rome. Cullen's aspiration was to bring the Irish Catholic Church to a better appreciation of the spiritual and doctrinal leadership provided by the revived Papacy. Cullen was particularly opposed to the idea that the bishops should enter into agreements with the British government, or that the Papacy should be encouraged to go down this path. This made him Russell's most significant opponent in Ireland, and Russell knew it. Already in autumn 1847 Russell had sent his father-in-law and cabinet colleague Minto to Rome to attempt to persuade the Pope to support the cause of order and government initiatives in Ireland. This mission had little effect. Nor, it turned out, did Russell's endowment scheme, which he had hoped to make the centre of his Irish reforms in 1848, but which was so obviously disliked by important spokesmen on both sides of the religious divide that it was never introduced to Parliament.

The failure of the policy of endowment was a serious blow to Russell's Irish policy, which he blamed in part on the increasing intransigence of the bishops. It made him all the more determined to press ahead with raising the educational standards of Irish Catholics by establishing the non-denominational Queen's Colleges, set up in 1845, as the main university for them. There was considerable support for the Colleges from lay Catholics and a large minority of bishops led by Archbishop Murray. Russell hoped that the Catholic Church's anxiety about the excesses of the European revolutions of 1848 would lead it to appreciate the benefits of working with the state to support the cause of order. But Cullen called the Synod of Thurles in 1850 to secure, by a narrow majority, a condemnation of the Colleges as injurious to the faith and morals of Catholics. Cullen argued that few of the initial professorial appointments at the Colleges went to Catholics, and that it was essential to preserve the independence and vigour of Church teaching – by establishing a separate privately funded Catholic University, for which he then worked tirelessly.

By 1850, the combination of the Famine, the virulence of Protestant

feeling in Britain, and the opposition of the Cullenites in Ireland had left Russell's mission to Ireland looking like a humiliating failure. Russell was a proud man, and this calamitous outcome explains his last, most disastrous and still often misunderstood miscalculation – his strong criticism of the Catholic bishops in his Durham letter of November 1850 and Ecclesiastical Titles Act of 1851.

The cause was the Pope's declaration that he had established a hierarchy of twelve Catholic bishops in England, a declaration trumpeted exultantly by the leader of English Catholicism, Wiseman. The re-establishment of the hierarchy – in place of the system of vicars-apostolic – made little practical difference, certainly not to the safety of the state, to which all Catholic officeholders had to swear an oath of allegiance under the terms of the 1829 Emancipation Act. If anything, the new departure encouraged a spirit of self-government, independent of Rome, among English Catholics. However it was anathema to excited Protestant opinion, and marked the high point of Victorian anti-Catholicism. By December 1850 5 per cent of the British population had petitioned the Queen to challenge the pope's action. It was also anathema to Russell, though for different reasons – his Whig insistence that a liberal state must not cede any of its temporal powers to ecclesiastical forces which by nature were intolerant, narrow and proselytising. This was a classic point of Whig-liberal doctrine, about which Russell felt particularly vehemently because of the rise of a Tractarian movement in the Church of England which sought to assert clerical independence from state courts and parliament in doctrinal matters. Russell's declaration in the Durham letter that the Pope's act was invalid until approved and regulated by the state was correct in law. However it ignored the realities of Ireland, where the British state and the courts had in practice recognised the status and rights of the Catholic bishops for many years.

Some historians have assumed that Russell stupidly 'forgot' about Ireland in making his declaration, but this is most unlikely. Though in the Durham letter his main fire was reserved for the Tractarians, by the time that he came to

introduce the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill it was aimed squarely at Cullen, whom he clearly saw as a major enemy of a liberal state in its attempt to pacify and improve Ireland. But his insistence that Catholic bishops had no right to their titles without the state's acquiescence generated great opposition from the Irish MPs, led by G.H. Moore. Indeed the debates on the bill were key steps in the development of a more coherent grouping of Irish representatives, the 'Irish Brigade', which went into opposition to Russell and, assisted by unprecedented clerical electoral influence, emerged as a party at the election of 1852 with over forty seats.

Russell's speech in 1851, and a further tirade against the Catholic Church's interference in politics in 1853, broke his long-standing informal alliance with Irish representatives and did a lot to erode his political position: he did not return to the premiership until 1865. It is often said that his behaviour on these issues was an incomprehensible betrayal of his earlier pro-Catholic approach. But this is a misperception. Russell was an ardent Protestant, more earnest on religious subjects than the vast majority of nineteenth-century prime ministers. He hated what he saw as the superstitious intolerance of Catholicism. His policy was always the Erastian one of active state interference in religious affairs in order to check the potential aggression of churches. This, he thought, was the only way to maintain state power and promote beneficial reform. To him this went hand-in-hand with a policy of proper representation of minorities and civil equality in office-holding, so as to enhance the effectiveness of political dialogue with lay Catholic opinion. In his eyes, Liberal government meant opposing the imposition on Ireland of both English prejudice and narrow clericalism.

Russell's policy was not a complete failure. Between 1846 and 1851 Catholics enjoyed extensive political patronage, while a Franchise Act of 1850 significantly increased the Catholic electorate, and the Queen's Colleges were given university status in 1850. But the most crucial parts of it were killed, not just by the tragedy of the famine, but

also because of the decisive polarisation of Protestant-Catholic relations which followed it. Cullen's influence in Ireland increased in the 1850s, while most politically influential Englishmen had little sympathy for Irish reform, and an era was emerging in which it was generally assumed that 'English' governing notions were best for Ireland. Indeed, imbued with the economic and political confidence of the 1850s, significant parts of the British public felt that there were few parts of the world that were *not* suited to a dose of 'English' values. What is striking is that, when G.H. Moore opposed the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill, he argued that Russell's approach, of state power over the Church, was the 'despotic' one adopted by continental regimes, and was inappropriate for a free people. The same argument was used by British Protestant Dissenters. This rejection of any form of Catholic alliance with the state, as an 'un-English' strategy, paved the way for the settlement of the Irish Church question in 1869, not by concurrent endowment but by disestablishment and disendowment. By this act, all Irish religions were set free from an association with the state, and even the grant to the

Maynooth seminary ceased. The policy of 1869 was broadly approved by British opinion. The sympathy for Irish Church disestablishment expressed at the election of 1868 is sometimes seen as the beginning of a new era of English sympathy with Ireland and Irish values. It is, however, arguable that this is wrong, and that most of the Englishmen and Scotsmen who supported it did so because they thought that disestablishment was the only solution to the Irish religious problem that was in tune with 'English', as opposed to Continental, ideals. If this is true, it is not surprising that the decline in Anglo-Irish relations described elsewhere in this issue by Alan O'Day and Ian Machin was so soon to follow, and Ireland to be in turmoil again by 1880.

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- 1 *Hansard's parliamentary debates*, 3rd series, vol. 27, c. 365, 30 March 1835.
- 2 P. Scherer, *Lord John Russell: a biography*, Selinsgrove, 1999, p. 97.
- 3 Donal Kerr, 'A Nation of Beggars'? *Priests, people, and politics in famine Ireland, 1846–1852* Oxford, 1994, p. 198.

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Gladstone dominated both the Liberal Party and Ireland in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Alan O'Day analyses his legacy.

# Gladstone and Ireland: the Legacy

Gladstone I could listen to and look at for ever, and even in his Coercion days he had the utmost fascination for me. The lion-like head, the flashing eyes, the mobile mouth, the variety and grace of gestures that involved his whole body, the mutability of his voice, now fire, now silk, now honey, now gall, the perfect clearness of even his whispered accents, the perverse style that often, to quote his great rival, 'intoxicated him with the exuberance of his own verbosity' and led him into endless parentheses from which he extricated himself with apparent ease, and his final peroration that left his audience spell-bound, so that there was an appreciable interval between the end of his speech and the tempest of applause, that followed from friend and enemy. [Francis Fahey, c. 1891]<sup>1</sup>

Division of Ireland into Protestants and Catholics, Nationalists and Unionists would die out under home rule, thus producing a state of amity between Ireland and Britain. [*Manchester Guardian*, 1912]

Gladstone, as Roy Jenkins observes, 'for the first fifty-eight years of his life had applied himself very sparingly to Hibernian problems'. However, from 1868, 'my mission is to pacify Ireland', he said though it was an aim that even his fondest admirers would not claim was fulfilled. More accurate was his profession that he was 'as fast bound to Ireland as Ulysses was to his mast'.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman's legendary *1066 and All That* most successfully encapsulates the problem: Gladstone 'spent his declining years trying to guess the answer to the Irish Question; unfortunately whenever he was getting warm, the Irish secretly changed the Question'. In 1868 Gladstone began the Hibernian enterprise that occupied so much of his remaining political career.

Gladstone's mast was erected in 1868 and it did not finally come down until he retired in March

1894. Generations of students and teachers equally have been dedicated to the task of explaining why Gladstone chose to champion the cause of Ireland's Catholics and what effect his various schemes had. No doubt Irish difficulties were sufficiently immense to warrant a good deal of attention but Gladstone's obsession with Ireland fully warrants the close analysis it receives.

Gladstone's Irish reforms are imposing in number. During his first Ministry (1868–74) he was chiefly responsible for the Irish Church Act, disestablishing the [Episcopal] Church of Ireland. This legislation removed the state from the realm of religion in Ireland by also ending subsidies for Catholic and Presbyterian theological training. Less successfully, he grappled with the treacherous land question in the Land Act of 1870; still less happily Gladstone responded to the demand of the Catholic Church for a state-funded university under its control in his abortive Irish University bill in 1873. On this last he was deserted by the Catholic Hierarchy and many Irish MPs in the House of Commons. Gladstone released many of the imprisoned Fenians with the intent 'to draw a line between the Fenians & the people of Ireland, & to make the people of Ireland indisposed to cross it'.<sup>3</sup> His very exacting efforts were dogged by the opposition of Conservatives and a section of his own party, but excepting the instance of the University bill, Gladstone enjoyed the support of Irish Liberals, the Catholic Church and the nascent Home Rule movement. Following the electoral defeat in 1874 Gladstone resigned the leadership of the Liberal party and threw himself into writing tracts against the Vatican decrees of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, despite the ill-feeling his writing engendered among Irish Catholics, he remained for them the most revered English politician. Francis Fahy's idealisation cited above is but

one of innumerable tributes to the fascination he exercised on Irish Catholics. In 1877 Gladstone made his only substantial visit to Ireland (he returned to Dublin briefly in 1880), receiving the Freedom of Dublin as a mark of respect for his Irish labours.

Gladstone's second government extending from 1880–85 was, if anything, even more immersed in Irish problems and he had to pursue these with less reliable support from Irishmen than he had during the first Ministry. He attempted to mitigate the growing land agitation across the Irish Sea in 1880 with the Compensation for Disturbances bill, a measure defeated in the House of Lords. The following year he piloted the Land Act of 1881, generally regarded as a seminal piece of legislation and secured a further land act in 1882 as part of the bargain known as the Kilmainham Treaty, described in more detail by Ian Machin in his article which follows. In 1883 the Liberals passed the Agricultural Labourers' Act, legislation close to the heart of the Irish party. In 1885 he was part of the Cabinet minority who wanted to implement more extended local government in Ireland. Other legislation, though not directed exclusively at Ireland, had enormous effects there. The Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883 along with the Franchise and Redistribution Acts of 1884 and 1885 are such instances.

Most famously, he became Prime Minister for a third time in February 1886 in order 'to examine whether it is or is not practicable to comply with the desire...for the establishment...of a legislative body, to sit in Dublin, and to deal with Irish as distinguished from imperial affairs'.<sup>4</sup> His answer was in the affirmative; Gladstone's plan was encapsulated in the Government of Ireland bill which he introduced on 8 April in speech lasting three hours and twenty-five minutes that held the House of Commons spellbound throughout. Now often seen as a limited half-way house, it was a bill which the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, when he first saw it in draft, thought qualified Gladstone as a 'criminal lunatic'.<sup>5</sup> Few on any side saw his scheme as anything less than a bold stroke for good or ill, a point sometimes

lost in the modern literature. He promoted home rule at the cost of splitting his parliamentary ranks and party. Though the bill was defeated and the Liberals lost heavily in the general election of 1886, it provided the basis of the bills of 1893 and 1912. His influence was to be evident up to and beyond 1921. In what must be one of the great ironies of Anglo-Irish history, Gladstone's reasoning about the distinctive character of Ireland and the necessity of founding institutions to reflect this reality was assumed by Andrew Bonar Law, Austen Chamberlain and Walter Long between 1919 and 1921 when they, along with Lloyd George, were midwives to post-1921 Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

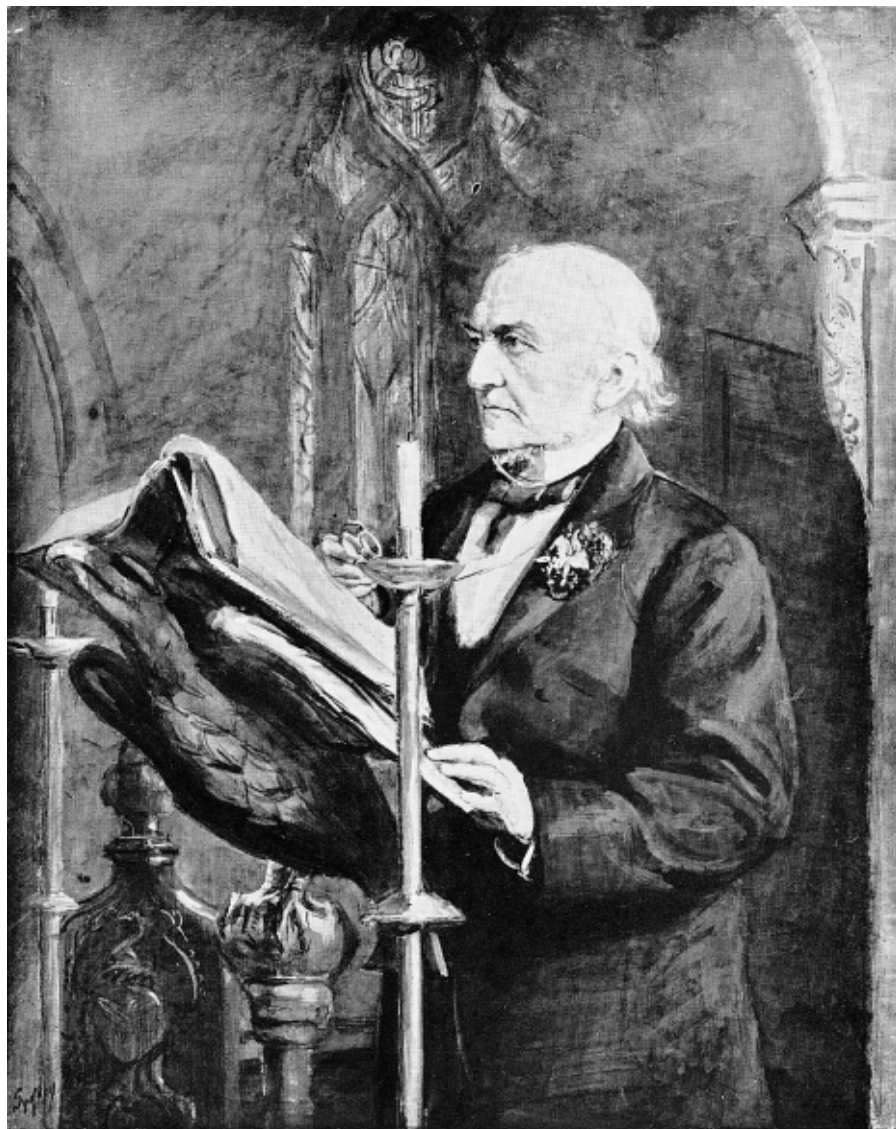
Defeated and with the Liberals out of office for perhaps as long as seven years, Gladstone might have gone into an honourable retirement. Following the election the Tory front bench, W. H. Smith, thought: 'the G. O. M. seems to me to have become something very like a dangerous lunatic. Of him probably there is an end'.<sup>7</sup> This, like so much about Gladstone, proved a false prophecy. In spite of advanced age he stayed bound to the Irish mast. Had Gladstone retired in 1886, it is entirely probable that his party would have moderated its Home Rule commitment. Most of his important colleagues held reservations about the project. A rising young Liberal, Richard Haldane, remarked in the late 1880s that while it was legitimate for Gladstone to 'regard the establishment of a Parliament in Dublin as the be-all and end-all of Liberal policy', it was also the case that 'his colleagues are hardly justified in adopting substantially the same course'.<sup>8</sup> The violence engendered by the Plan of Campaign in Ireland, the infamous allegations by *The Times* of Parnellite complicity in crime took a heavy toll on many Liberals' faith in their Irish commitment, yet none of these things deterred Gladstone. During the crisis over the Parnell divorce Gladstone played an instrumental role, having perhaps the single greatest impact on Parnell's fall by insisting that if Parnell remained at the head of the Irish party his own leadership of the Liberals would be 'almost a nullity'.<sup>9</sup> In the crunch the majority of Irish party MPs and the preponderance of Ireland's Catholics opted for Gladstone.

In many ways the most demanding part of Gladstone's commitment still lay ahead in his final period of office from 1892 to March 1894. Following an electoral outcome that would have warranted postponing a Home Rule bill, Gladstone soldiered on. He gave notice to the friends and opponents of Home Rule alike that 'the question of Ireland is almost, if not altogether, my sole link with public life'.<sup>10</sup> He did not ignore the threat posed by the House of Lords to home rule, warning later in the same speech that if the Peers acted against the will of the House of Commons over Home Rule, it is 'impossible for such a [Liberal] government to regard the rejection of such a bill as terminating its duty'. His introduction of the second home rule bill on 13 February 1893 lasted two and a quarter hours and, according to Henry Lucy the doyen of lobby journalists, 'the explanation of the intricate measure was a model of lucidity; the opening passages of the speech soared on lofty heights of eloquence; the stately peroration that closed it will take rank with its most famous predecessors'.<sup>11</sup> The parliamentary struggle in 1886 was short and sharp, but in 1893 it dragged on for months. After the Easter recess Lucy observed, 'both sides mean business, the business of the opposition being obstruction'.<sup>12</sup> He could not 'call to mind any epoch of obstruction exceeding in deliberation and pertinacity that which clogged the wheels of Parliament during the past eight weeks'. The bill finally passed in the House of Commons on 2 September. Individual divisions on clauses often had turnouts numbering more than 600. The physical endurance required was enormous. Throughout the episode Gladstone remained tied to his Irish mast. After what can only be called a Herculean effort, Gladstone himself was prepared to revive the bill in the next session of the House of Commons. His colleagues resisted. A few months later in March 1894 he laid down his burden and no further home rule bill came before the House of Commons until 1912.

By any measure Gladstone's input into Irish affairs up to his final days was huge. Paradoxically, the effort was not commensurate with the results. Of his

several exclusively major Irish proposals, only the Irish Church Act [1869] can be counted an unambiguous success. Over the years 1885 to 1905 Conservatives and Unionists not only passed more legislation for Ireland than he but their acts had immeasurably larger long-term beneficial consequences. It was they who turned Irish tenants into owner occupiers, it was they who dealt with the democratisation of Irish local institutions and it was they who came closest to grappling with the religious dimension of Irish education. Gladstone's land acts may have undermined the sanctity of property rights and set other important precedents but he was never more than luke-warm about tenant proprietorship, an issue to which he responded pragmatically as in 1886 rather than from high principle. F.S.L. Lyons suggests that the Act of 1881 may have delayed the final solution though he also praises Gladstone's intent.<sup>13</sup> It is certainly the case that the Act, particularly the creation of land courts which set rentals for 15 years, was the unwitting progenitor for the second phase of the land war, the Plan of Campaign which began in 1886.

The two home rule bills may have set back other more pertinent Irish reforms without advancing self-government. Moreover, the bills of 1886 and 1893 had a major and not always helpful effect on the bill of 1912. As George Boyce points out, not until 1920 was a home rule bill skilfully drafted and that came from the hands of Unionist politicians.<sup>14</sup> Gladstone's adoption of home rule, as Lyons notes, exacerbated polarisation of communities in Ireland, pushing, for instance, Presbyterian radicals 'into a unionism which always went somewhat against the grain'.<sup>15</sup> Nor can it be overlooked that Gladstone, albeit reluctantly, implemented coercion in the 1870s and again twice did so in the first half of the 1880s. Though he initiated the release of Fenian prisoners, he was no soft-hearted sentimentalist where rebels were concerned. He treated the military prisoners, Fenians in the British army, without remorse and it was Benjamin Disraeli [the Earl of Beaconsfield]'s government which set the last of these men free. None of these observations is original;



none seriously impairs Gladstone's repute as Ireland's benefactor.

In spite of a lengthy catalogue of Unionist measures and some reservations about what Gladstone actually did in Irish affairs, we are unlikely to be witness to historical revisionism placing any single Conservative or collective of Tories and Unionists on a plane with Gladstone. His esteem in nationalist Ireland is not owed to his accomplishments in a strict sense, does not even hinge on his intentions, but rests on the intangible element of his generosity of spirit. What gives him a unique place in Irish historical memory may be best described by that overworked word, charisma. These same qualities give Gladstone his central place in the history of the Liberal Party and British liberal tradition. He exemplified the spirit that must always animate greatness in the public sphere, nobility of purpose, not just the initiation of con-

crete legislation or remedying grievances. Gladstone possessed the now unfashionable commitment to high ideals and his English and Irish followers responded to his uplifting purpose. He possessed a charisma for nationalists that in the years between Daniel O'Connell's death in 1847 and the Easter Rising of 1916 was second to none excepting perhaps Parnell's - and even the great Irish Chief himself could not match Gladstone's appeal when put to the acid test.

Within the context, the years of the first administration (1868-74) have a special pertinence. In general this period has received less attention than the later years. But it was then that the lines Gladstone subsequently pursued were laid down.

The Church Act in his eyes was never just about appeasing the sensitivi-

*concluded on page 47*

# An Intractable Problem? Gladstone and Irish Home Rule

On attaining office as Prime Minister for the second time in April 1880, Gladstone could have said 'my mission is to pacify Ireland', as he had said when starting his first premiership in 1868. For Ireland was once again in turmoil. Neglected by the Disraeli Government of 1874–80, it experienced towards the end of that period a severe agricultural recession which had pronounced political effects.

Gladstone's first Government had disestablished the Church of Ireland by an Act of 1869, and had aimed to alleviate the position of the tenants by the Irish Land Act of 1870. But the provisions of the latter measure, scarcely adequate at the best of times, availed not at all in the conditions of the later 1870s, when tenants could not pay rent because of an agricultural slump and the fall in prices of their goods on the market. Evictions of the tenantry had multiplied: there were just over 2,000 in 1877, but nearly 10,500 in 1880. Familiar signs of violent revolt against the landlords, including murder and the maiming of farm animals, made their appearance.

Charles Stewart Parnell, an Irish MP since 1875, organiser of effective obstruction in the House of Commons and unquestioned leader of the Home Rule party by May 1879, encouraged the agrarian revolt. In October 1879 the Irish National Land League was formed, with two Fenians (members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood) as secretaries, two more as treasurers, and Parnell (not himself a Fenian) as president.

The League soon obtained large amounts of money from Irish emigrants in North America and Australia. Under the effects of the Secret Ballot Act of 1872 a majority of MPs with Home Rule opin-

ions had already been returned by the Irish elections in 1874. Although these opinions had not then been well enough defined to form the ideological basis of a separate party, by 1879 the Home Rulers were generally more militant and determined and formed a more cohesive party. This was because of Parnell's effectiveness and the wide social discontent and disruption which now lay behind the political demand for Home Rule. In the general election of 1880 the Home Rule party advanced, gaining some sixty-five of the 105 Irish seats.

As in 1868, something had to be done for Ireland by the new premier. Gladstone's second ministry was beset from the start not only by the Irish difficulty, but also by the claim of atheists to enter Parliament which was repeatedly presented by Charles Bradlaugh. Largely because of these two problems, important electoral reforms to which the Government gave a high priority were not carried until the second half of the ministry, in the years 1883, 1884 and 1885.

Gladstone was less decisive about Ireland than he had been in 1868. He had then had a clear programme of intended Irish reform, but in 1880 he had nothing in view beyond further reform of the land law. He certainly was not as yet a Home Ruler. Indeed, Home Rule seemed completely beyond the prospects of government action, as Gladstone's new cabinet consisted very largely of Whig aristocrats who were, for the most part, natural opponents of Home Rule. (Some of them feared for the safety of their Irish estates.) The only radicals in the cabinet were John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain – and both of these, ironically, were to become Liberal Unionists in 1886, along with most of the



Whig aristocracy whom they had often opposed in the years 1880 – 5.

A Liberal premier who declared himself in favour of Home Rule in the early 1880s would have broken up his party by driving Whigs and some radicals out of it, as actually happened in 1886. Gladstone had the firm intention of keeping his strongly divisive party united (as he still hoped he could manage to do in 1886, when he nevertheless decided to introduce Home Rule). So the legislative contribution of Gladstone's second ministry (1880 – 85) to the Irish question was modest, though less so than Disraeli's in the previous Government. The only purely Irish measure that succeeded in getting through Parliament, apart from a Coercion Bill, was a new Land Bill in 1881. (In addition, a government bill of 1880 providing compensation for eviction was introduced; this passed the Commons but not the Lords.)

The Irish Land Act of 1881 was more purposeful than that of ten years before. It gave the tenants the famous 'three Fs' (fixity of tenure, fair rents, and free sale of produce) for which they had long been agitating. Although it was quite effective, and was privately welcomed by the Home Rulers, the new Act did nothing to quell the agrarian violence. Parnell had partially supported the bill in Parliament, but he continued to encourage the agitation.

Against the wishes of Gladstone, Chamberlain and Bright, an Irish Coercion Bill had been adopted by the cabinet. It became law in March 1881 after great obstructive efforts by the Home Rule MPs. The measure suspended the Habeas Corpus Act, and gave the Irish executive in Dublin Castle unlimited powers of arrest. Under these terms, Parnell and two other Home Rule MPs were imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol for six months from October 1881. The combination of land reform and coercion had failed spectacularly in its main object of stopping lethal agitation. In the ten months which followed the passage of the Coercion Bill, the number of agrarian outrages rose by sixty per cent compared with the preceding ten-month period.

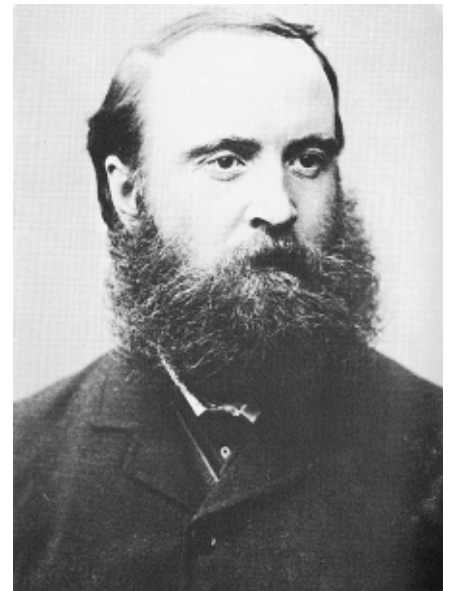
Thus, Irish agitation was reaching greater and greater heights and the

Government had yet to find a solution. In its continuing quest for one, Parnell and his imprisoned colleagues were released after an informal agreement had been reached in April 1882 that the Government would finance payment of rent arrears owed by Irish tenant farmers, in return for a commitment by Parnell to try to end disorder in Ireland.

This prospect of peace was soon shattered. The Irish Viceroy, Lord Cowper and the Chief Secretary, W.E. Forster, who had supported coercion, were replaced by Earl Spencer and Lord Frederick Cavendish respectively. Cavendish and the Under-Secretary, Thomas Burke, were immediately murdered in Phoenix Park by members of a secret society, the Invincibles. A stiffer Coercion Act followed, which the Home Rulers had to oppose, while an Arrears Bill was passed which was not generous enough to be used by most of the tenants who owed rent. So the stalemate continued; but, partly because of the influence of the 1881 Land Act and the 'Kilmainham Treaty' (the agreement between Parnell and the Government), it did so much more quietly until 1885.

At last in Ireland there was something which resembled peace. Into this void came some fruitful legislation from which the Home Rule party benefited – including determined and successful moves to prevent electoral bribery in the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883, and the enfranchisement of many more potential Home Rule voters by the Franchise Act (Third Parliamentary Reform Act) of 1884. The latter was passed as the result of an agreement between Gladstone and Lord Salisbury, the Conservative leader, to accompany it with a grand scheme of redistribution of constituencies. This scheme made most constituencies single-member ones and made the size of their electorates much more equal.

The enlarged franchise and single-member constituencies were established in Ireland as well as Great Britain by the new legislation. The effect was to give a large boost to the electoral prospects of Parnell and his party. The bargaining power of the Home Rule party consequently rose, as the



Charles Stewart Parnell

leaders of both Liberals and Conservatives were well aware. Gladstone supported an attempt by Joseph Chamberlain in early 1885 to side-track Home Rule by conferring more restricted devolution through county boards and a national council instead of through an Irish Parliament.

This proposal gained important Irish Catholic support but not that of the (incidentally Protestant) Parnell, and it was defeated in cabinet after a sharp division. Parnell then listened to Lord Randolph Churchill, who produced a Conservative offer to end coercion. The upshot of this was that the voting of Home Rule MPs was instrumental in carrying a Conservative amendment to the budget in June 1885. Gladstone resigned, and an ensuing minority Conservative Government, led by Lord Salisbury, held office until the beginning of 1886.

The seven-month period of this Conservative ministry was crucial to Home Rule and to the British political parties. Parnell kept his party's bargaining power to the fore. It had already been seen that he would countenance Conservative as well as Liberal approaches. Moreover, the Conservatives had the advantage of possessing a majority in the House of Lords, which might pass a Conservative Home Rule measure but almost certainly would not pass a Liberal one. On practical grounds, therefore, Parnell would have preferred an attempt to carry Home Rule by the Conservatives rather than

the Liberals. So too – with the addition of a naturally strong desire to preserve Liberal unity – would Gladstone.

Parnell was encouraged by the actions of the Conservative ministry. The Conservatives had promised to end coercion in Ireland, and they did so. They also carried the first scheme of State-assisted purchase of Irish land by the tenant farmers. The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord Carnarvon, favoured granting a certain Home Rule status. He held secret conversations first with Justin McCarthy, Parnell's chief lieutenant, and on 1 August 1885, authorised by Salisbury, with Parnell himself.

By the time these conversations took place, Gladstone was also veering towards accepting Home Rule. When he actually became a Home Ruler is not easy to pinpoint because of the secrecy in which all political communications on the matter were conducted until the end of 1885. But Gladstone had initiated and carried – with Salisbury's agreement – the large franchise extension and constituency changes of 1884 – 85. He must have foreseen (as Salisbury also would have done) that the increase in strength of support for Home Rule gained through these changes would influence one major party or the other to introduce a

Home Rule measure. So it seems very likely that both Gladstone and Salisbury were ready to adopt Home Rule from June 1885, when the Redistribution Bill was carried in the Lords and subsequently became law.

Preferring as he did that the Conservatives should introduce a Home Rule measure (which he knew that he might well support but that many Liberals assuredly would not), Gladstone tried to preserve ambiguity in his communications on the subject until he was forced into the open in December, causing Salisbury to drop his approaches to Home Rule and transferring the political difficulties of introducing the question to Gladstone.

In correspondence with Gladstone, Parnell sent him a moderate proposal for Home Rule (more limited than Gladstone's own bill of 1886) on 30 October, but obtained no reply until after a general election was held in late November and early December. Parnell decided that the Conservatives should be given as much support as possible in this election, so that either they, if they formed the next Government, would introduce Home Rule, or the Liberals, if the next ministry were to be theirs, would be so much in need of Home Rule support that they would bring in the desired bill.

Parnell therefore exerted his strong influence over the majority of Irish immigrant electors in Great Britain by issuing a special manifesto on 21 November, two days before polling began, urging them to vote Conservative. Apart from the return (for the Liverpool Scotland division) of the single Irish Home Rule MP ever to represent a constituency in Great Britain, T.P. O'Connor, it has been estimated that this manifesto shifted some twenty urban seats to the Conservatives.

The Liberal returns in the counties increased, however, and when polling concluded the Liberals had won a majority over the Conservatives only slightly less than in 1880 – but one which, at eighty-six seats, exactly equalled the total number of Home Rule MPs returned. The result was untidy and not encouraging to any of the parties, even Parnell's. The Conservatives on the face of it would find it very





The Land War 1881

hard to govern at all. The Liberals might only be able to govern with Parnell's support, and this would weaken any prospect of a Home Rule bill getting through the Lords.

Into this situation of renewed stalemate came the action (still puzzling today) of Herbert Gladstone, a Liberal MP and William's youngest son, who was acting as his father's secretary. Probably he had primarily the idea of Liberal strength and unity in mind, based on support for Home Rule. On 19 December 1885 William Gladstone resumed his contact with Parnell, telling him that it would be for the best if the Conservative Government (still in office) were to introduce 'an adequate and honourable plan' for settling the question of Irish government. But before that, on 15 December, Herbert Gladstone had seriously hampered the prospect of this happening by telling some newspaper editors that his father now supported Home Rule. Two papers published the news on 17 December, and it appeared widely in the press on the following day.

A response to extraordinary political tensions, Herbert's indiscreet disclosure created extraordinary new ones. The Conservatives had been presented with an unmissable opportunity to embarrass and divide the Liberals. There was now little possibility of an alliance between Parnell and the Conservatives to carry Home Rule with the backing of Gladstone and most of the Liberals. The

Conservative leaders – who would in any case have had grave difficulty in trying to get their followers to support Home Rule – seemed now likely to leave an effort at Home Rule to Gladstone, who would have his own difficulties with his party. The Liberal party was not prepared to adopt Home Rule, and was not going to be suddenly jolted into accepting it (on a unified party basis) by the naive action of Herbert Gladstone. Opposition to Home Rule by most Whigs in the party was very likely, if only because many Whigs had estates in Ireland and would fear possible expropriation by a Home Rule Parliament. The Conservatives were likely to ally with Whigs to oppose Home Rule and defend the Union. The outcome of the political crisis bore out this likelihood.

Salisbury resigned on 28 January 1886 after being defeated on an amendment to agricultural policy. Gladstone commenced his third min-

istry, and formed a new cabinet on 3 February. There had been some conversions to Home Rule among leading Liberals, but hopes for party unity in the matter, which Herbert Gladstone had probably harboured, were not being realised. Several Liberals refused to join the cabinet on account of the premier's suspected Home Rule intentions. Chamberlain resigned his office at the end of March, when a Home Rule bill was being discussed in cabinet.

William Gladstone introduced the bill in the Commons on 8 April, and explained the intention behind it of establishing an Irish Parliament in Dublin which would have legislative powers over all subjects except reserved ones which would include defence, foreign and colonial relations, trading and customs matters, and coinage. After sixteen days of debate the Commons rejected the bill by 343 votes to 313. The Conservative opposition was swelled by ninety-three Liberals (mostly Whigs, but including seventeen radicals such as Chamberlain), who became known as Liberal Unionists. The Liberal dissenters had been instrumental in defeating the bill.

Home Rule was only beginning its fraught parliamentary career, however. The Liberal division and the depression of 1886 and after were succeeded by more prosperous times. Questions of Irish self-government and independence continued to exercise a prominent role in British politics until the early 1920s and, since their re-emergence in the mid-1960s, have been doing so once again.

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The Liberal Government came close to granting Ireland Home Rule in 1914. **Jeremy Smith** examines why it failed and what happened after.

# Asquith, the Third Home Rule Bill and the Easter Rising

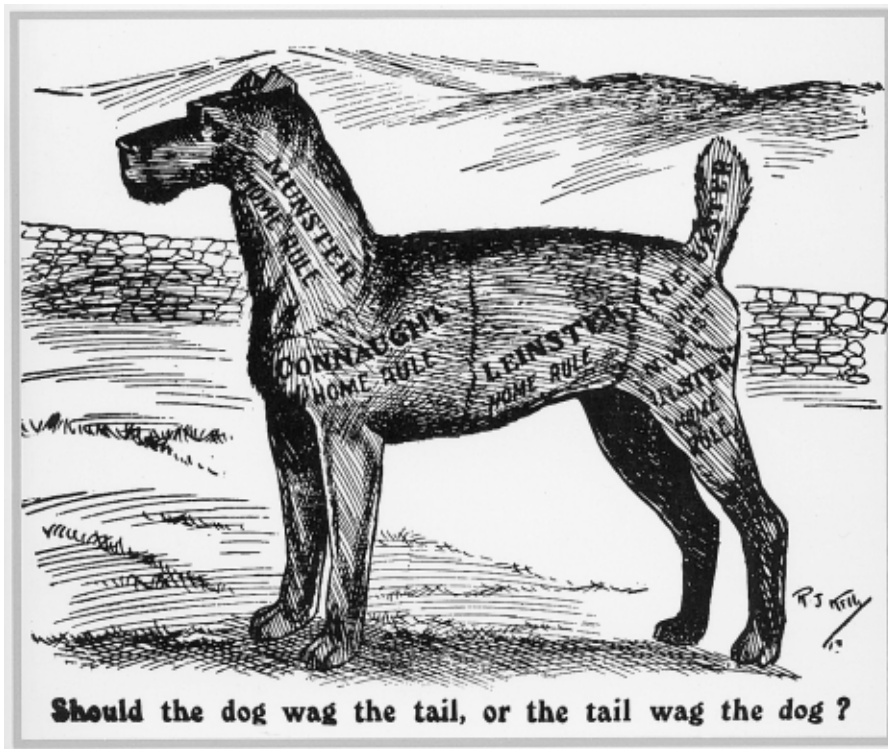
An abiding myth of Anglo-Irish history has been the notion that British policy in Ireland was characterised above all else by ‘too little, too late’. Whether it was Catholic Emancipation in 1828, Disestablishment in 1869, Gladstone’s land reforms of the 1870s or the Home Rule bills of 1886, 1893 or 1912 (which were not just late but never actually arrived), the British Government has displayed an unerring knack towards poor time keeping. Explanations of this trait range from Machiavellian self-interest to colonial techniques of ‘divide and rule’, and from a basic misunderstanding of Irish people and society, to an almost institutionalised tendency towards prevarication and apathy in the governance of Ireland.

Irish Republicanism has developed this myth further. Physical force is held to be legitimised by the evidence that a British government will only take notice of violence and that when it does so it tends to over-react. Within this paradigm most of the ‘great’ episodes in Irish dissent must be understood as justifiable pressure on a recalcitrant authority, for example Fenian activity in the 1860s, the Land Wars of the 1870s and 1880s, the development of the Irish volunteer movement or most recently the emergence of the IRA.

For subscribers to the prevarication and apathy model, no period more clearly demonstrates the force of the hypothesis than the Liberal ministry of Asquith between 1910 and 1916. The drift towards civil war from 1912 and then the Dublin Rising of 1916 have long been attributed to the almost criminal neglect of a Prime Minister who was allegedly more concerned with love-ditties to Venetia Stanley or befuddled with

claret, and to a Chief Secretary – Augustine Birrell – whose days were spent composing verse or witty ripostes. Historians have read Asquith’s oft-quoted phrase ‘wait and see’ as an enduring epitaph for his government’s mishandling of Ireland.

There is much to commend such a representation. Well before the Dublin Easter Rising in 1916 the Liberal government was thought hesitant and irresolute in its Irish policy – its introduction of the Home Rule Bill in April 1912, for example, was seen as the consequence of dependence upon Irish Nationalist votes in the Commons rather than any long-standing ideological commitment. During the Bill’s progress, the Government signally failed to confront the build-up of resistance or to uphold law and order in Ireland, allowing the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and later the Irish Volunteers to mobilise unchecked and with little hindrance to their attempts to acquire arms. Indeed an arms ban was not finally introduced until December 1913, several years too late and without the political will behind it to prevent the Larne and Howth ‘gun-running’ episodes in 1914. Unionist leaders Sir Edward Carson and James Craig, and Andrew Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, all avoided prosecution despite their openly seditious speeches, a show of political weakness that had rarely been extended to Irish Nationalist rhetoricians. More seriously, Asquith fatally delayed his compromise plan to settle the differences between Nationalists and Unionists until the very last moment, early in 1914. By this stage, with the acute polarisation of attitudes and opinions, and both sides highly organised and apparently well armed, it is difficult to imagine a more



unpropitious moment in which to negotiate a settlement. 'As was so often and so tragically the case with British policy in Ireland, on each occasion too little was offered too late.'

Liberal prevarication continued into the war. Unlike the Ulstermen, Nationalists under their leader John Redmond had followed a constitutional path to achieving their goal, yet were forced to watch their keenly won Home Rule bill suspended for the duration of the war. The postponement allowed elements advocating physical force in Ireland to gain influence and eventually to seize the initiative from the constitutional parties. On the outbreak of hostilities Redmond offered the Irish Volunteers to the British war effort and requested a unified Irish Brigade, as had been granted to the Ulstermen; both were repudiated.<sup>2</sup> This pointless affront to Redmond was compounded during the Cabinet reshuffle of 1915, when Sir Edward Carson was made Attorney-General. By failing to provide any obvious recompense for the Nationalist party's loyalty to the British war effort, government 'wait and see' provided a golden opportunity for more extreme Nationalists and Republicans, which they took in 1916. Yet even in the days leading up to the Easter Rising, with intelligence reports alerting Dublin Castle to the possibility of a rising at Easter, Birrell

could inform a close acquaintance that 'I laugh at the whole thing'.<sup>3</sup> While elements of Ireland gently smouldered, the British Government appeared powerless and unconcerned, more preoccupied by the forthcoming Fairyhouse races than by troubling thoughts of insurrection.

But to characterise the Liberal ministry as indifferent is to misunderstand its predicament and strategy. On one level Asquith would have argued that his approach was one of common sense, where no viable alternative existed, and on a political question that had become, by 1910, structurally resistant to an easy, or indeed to any, compromise. To use a modern term, Ireland was already experiencing 'zero-sum' politics, with Nationalists committed to all-Ireland

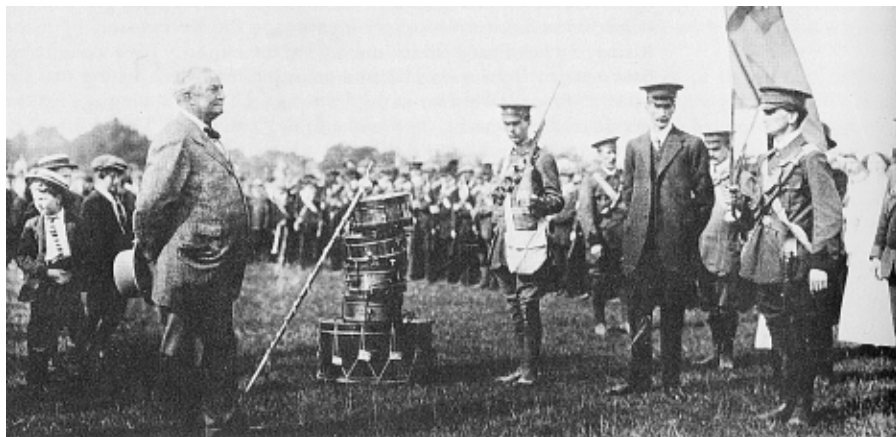
Home Rule and Ulstermen determined to maintain nine, or at the very least six, counties of Ulster within the United Kingdom. Asquith's line, therefore, was one of damage-limitation, aimed at preventing a far more explosive situation, if not actual civil war – an aim he successfully achieved between 1912 and 1916 (indeed, we might argue before 1919). To characterise the Liberal ministry as indifferent is therefore to misunderstand the dilemmas it faced and tactics it was employing.

Indeed, this apparent Liberal indifference might have had a more positive impulse behind it. Asquith realised early on that some form of temporary partition or 'special treatment' would be needed to appease the Ulstermen so that Home Rule could be granted to the rest of Ireland. The difficulty lay in selling this to both sides. Asquith calculated that by allowing a sense of looming disaster and emergency to develop, Nationalists would be encouraged into accepting some compromises to their Bill, as was tentatively achieved by February 1914. On the other hand those same pressures could scare Ulster into lowering its expectations; a not unreasonable assessment in light of recent research revealing strains and weaknesses within the Ulster Volunteer Force and plans for a Ulster provisional government.<sup>4</sup> So behind Asquith's policy of 'wait and see' there lurked a subtle attempt to manoeuvre both Irish parties into settlement.

Before the success or failure of this approach could be tested, the outbreak of war deflected attention on to European affairs. But failure should not automatically be assumed. Facing the

Unionist leaders: Sir Edward Carson and Andrew Bonar Law





Nationalist leader: John Redmond and Irish Volunteers

Ulstermen with the reality of having to choose between implementing their rickety provisional government and actually taking up arms against a British Army, could well have been just the type of *denouement* necessary to push Carson and Craig into a settlement.<sup>5</sup> In addition, it should not be overlooked that the Home Rule Bill was actually put on the statute book by Asquith in September 1914 (though suspended for the war) against the bitter opposition of Unionists and at some considerable political risk to his own position. The goal of O'Connell, Butt and Parnell had been won and constitutional nationalism vindicated. And far from laying the groundwork for the Easter Rising, the Bill's suspension was followed by some 150,000 – 200,000 Irishmen signing up to fight in France for the British Empire – in contrast to the 1,500 Volunteers who took part in the Rising. If this was neglect, then it was productive, successful and for the British army an invaluable injection of men.

The charge of neglect ultimately rests upon the outbreak of the Easter Rising in 1916. Yet in two significant respects such a claim appears groundless.

First, the Rising took everyone completely by surprise. Despite many vague snippets of intelligence, both the military and political arms of British rule in Ireland were united in perceiving no serious threat to civil order. This was based upon Sir Roger Casement's earlier arrest off the Kerry coast and failure to land arms for the Volunteers, without which a 'practical' rebellion was impossible. Moreover, on the very day of the planned rising, Eoin MacNeill, president of the Volunteers, called off the

movement's Easter manoeuvres, the cover under which Dublin was to be seized. Thus, when Patrick Pearse and friends marched into the GPO on Easter Monday they did so to the astonishment not just of the British, but of many leaders of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Sinn Fein, including the likes of MacNeill, Hobson and Arthur Griffith. Given this universal amazement it is difficult to imagine how the government might have obviated the very slim possibility of rebellion, particularly without slipping into coercive measures that might actually have generated the rebellion they were trying to avoid. Furthermore, the eventual scale of the Easter Rising, so small in numerical, geographical and military terms, was surely testament not to Liberal indifference but to the relative success of a passive, non-confrontational Liberal policy.

Second, the galvanisation of Irish popular opinion against British rule was less the product of the Rising than of the way in which the British authorities regained control – in particular the imposition of martial law, atrocities committed by British soldiers that earned popular infamy, such as the killing of the pacifist writer Sheehy-Skeffington, and the manner of the subsequent executions of the rebel leaders. In other words, what roused Irish opinion towards more extremist Nationalist sentiment, and towards Sinn Fein from 1917, was a shift in policy and an approach away from Asquith's more low-key and non-interventionist line. Interestingly, many commentators have long speculated that a more liberal reaction to the events of 1916, playing

down their importance, resisting executions and restoring normalcy as quickly as possible, might have successfully alienated (if not belittled) the extreme Nationalists, undermined what popular sympathy existed for physical force solutions and reinforced the position of the Irish Nationalists and their commitment to the constitutional path.

At fault, then, was not the failure of Liberal policy but its abandonment during the Rising, when arguably the situation most obviously required just such a liberal approach. In its place policy was handed over to the military authorities under the command of General Maxwell, who believed the restoration of order came by unleashing a robust coercive regime. This was perhaps an inevitable shift in policy given the circumstances. But it also reflected wider political developments, including the growing strength of Unionist forces within the Asquith Cabinet since their entry in 1915, and the mounting controversy over the issue of conscription. Given this drift, the reaction to the Easter Rising marked the formalisation of a policy that had had been sliding towards 'militarism' since 1915.

As Roy Douglas demonstrates in the article that follows, this would reach a climax in June 1916, when the Unionists Walter Long and Lord Lansdowne obstructed Lloyd George's attempts to introduce Home Rule immediately, thereby frustrating perhaps the last hope of a peaceful resolution of the Irish problem, and leading directly to the strife and civil war of 1919 – 22.

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# Lloyd George and the Partition of Ireland

Long before 1914, Irish attitudes to Home Rule had come to follow closely the divisions, not of social class or perceived economic interest, but of religion. Practically every Catholic was a Home Ruler, the vast majority of Protestants were Unionists. Ever since the 1880s, an off-and-on alliance had existed between Irish Nationalists and Liberals, in support of Irish Home Rule. 'Home Rule', like many expressions in politics, did not always mean the same thing, but it certainly included establishment of an Irish parliament and executive in Dublin. The only large part of Ireland which was overwhelmingly Protestant was north-east Ulster, and there the popular opposition to Home Rule was every bit as strong as was support in the rest of the country. But although, in theory, everybody in politics was either for or against setting up a new Home Rule authority for the whole of Ireland, in practice by 1914 many people on both sides of the great divide were groping towards a solution through which the Protestant areas of Ulster would receive different treatment from the rest of Ireland, at least in the short term.

As Jeremy Smith describes elsewhere in this issue, during the course of 1914 the Liberal government forced its Home Rule Bill – the Government of Ireland Bill – through parliament, against furious opposition from Conservatives (or, to give them their preferred name in this period, 'Unionists'). The Bill was awaiting the formal signature of the King. The new measure would set up an Irish Parliament with limited powers. The break from Great Britain would not be absolute, and some Irish MPs would continue to sit at Westminster. A concession had been made to the 'separateness' of the northern Protestant areas by a provision under which the six most Protestant Ulster counties would be excluded from the Home Rule authority for six years, but would then revert automatically to union with the rest of the country.

Neither side liked this compromise, and by the summer the country appeared to stand on the brink of civil war. As a last desperate effort to avert conflict, a Conference of leaders of the principal British and Irish parties was convened at Buckingham Palace.

On 24 July the Conference broke down, and the Cabinet met in an atmosphere of high crisis to debate Ireland. When the discussion had been proceeding for some time, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey reported the ultimatum which Austro-Hungary had just issued to Serbia, warning his colleagues that 'it may be the prelude to a war in which at least four of the great Powers might be involved'.<sup>1</sup> Three days later, the risk of international conflict had increased, but so deep was the general concern over Ireland that events in Dublin were still at the top of the Cabinet's agenda.<sup>2</sup>

When Britain went to war with Germany on 4 August, a few Liberal and Labour MPs wisely and courageously resisted the government's decision to fight. Irish MPs, by contrast, were unanimous in support: both the main body of Nationalists who followed John Redmond, and the 'Independent Nationalists' from Munster who looked to William O'Brien and the Unionists alike. As far as this could decently be done, the Home Rule question was swept under the carpet. On 18 September, the King signed the Home Rule Bill and also signed a new Suspensory Bill which delayed its operation until the end of the war. Yet – as one distinguished Irish historian has reflected – 'the Irish problem had been refrigerated, not liquidated. Nothing had been solved, and all was still to play for.'<sup>3</sup>

In May 1915, the first Coalition government was established. Asquith remained Prime Minister and the Liberals still provided a majority of the Ministers. Conservatives and Labour were brought into the government, and so was Sir Edward Carson – born and educated in Leinster, and MP for Dublin University,

yet acknowledged leader of the Ulster Unionists who had been such a thorn in the government's side before the war. Attempts were made to include John Redmond as well, but these failed.

In April 1916, the 'Easter Week Rising' took place in Dublin. The rebels, with no recognisable authority from anybody, proclaimed an 'Irish Republic', and seized control of various buildings. These rebels were often, though inaccurately, described as 'Sinn Fein', from the name of an extreme movement which sought to destroy all political links between Ireland and Great Britain. The military were able to re-establish control without too much difficulty. In the aftermath, the leaders of the rising were tried in secret by courts-martial, and no fewer than ninety people were condemned to death.

Some days before any executions were carried out, John Dillon, more or less Redmond's second-in-command, wrote from Dublin to his leader that 'so far feeling of the population of Dublin is *against* the Sinn Feiners. But a reaction might very easily be created'. Dillon went on to urge that 'the wisest course is to execute *no-one* for the present.'<sup>4</sup> To anyone with a sense of Irish history, the wisdom of that advice was obvious, and Redmond did his best. In the end, however, fifteen of the rebels were shot. The contrast with the wise clemency with which DeWet's rebels in South Africa had been treated earlier in the war is sharp.

Asquith promptly visited Ireland to examine the situation on the spot. On his return, he entrusted to the ever-resourceful Lloyd George the task of engineering a political settlement that might somehow repair the damage. Like the rest of his party, Lloyd George was a Home Ruler; but, as has been noted, 'the cause of Irish home rule was never one that roused (his) enthusiasm or fighting spirit, nor was he particularly interested in Irish affairs.'<sup>5</sup> This assessment is important in explaining Lloyd George's behaviour not only on this occasion but throughout his career. Unlike all Irish politicians in all parties, and many British politicians as well, his overriding concern was not to produce some particular constitutional result in Ireland, but to do other things. While

the war lasted, his concern was to ensure the most efficient prosecution of the war. Once the war was over he sought to produce a durable settlement in Ireland (whatever that settlement might happen to be), but he may have been even more anxious to keep his own government on an even keel.

When his investigations were complete, Lloyd George proposed immediate application of Home Rule legislation to the twenty-six Catholic southern counties, while the six Protestant northern counties would be excluded. Whether this exclusion was to be permanent or temporary was uncertain – Redmond was given to understand one thing, Carson was promised the other.<sup>6</sup> Both men were prepared to accept the arrangement as they understood it, but both had great difficulty in selling it to their followers. Part of the difficulty with any arrangement of this kind was that no line could be drawn which did not leave many people on the 'wrong' side of the proposed border. Northern Catholics and southern Protestants alike were aggrieved. Unionists in the government, notably Walter Long and Lord Lansdowne, waged a bitter war against the settlement, while Lloyd George threatened resignation if it was not accepted. In the end, the contradictory nature of Lloyd George's promises was appreciated by the Irish, and the whole thing collapsed – without Lloyd George or anybody else resigning.

A few months later, in December 1916, Lloyd George became Prime Minister of a reconstituted Coalition government. The new Ministry, unlike its predecessor, did not include either Asquith or his closest followers, and the Prime Minister's dependence on Unionist support was obvious.

Meanwhile, the situation in Ireland was deteriorating rapidly. Irish people who would have rejoiced at Home Rule a couple of years earlier were now coming to demand complete separation from Britain. On 3 February 1917, a by-election in the apparently rock-solid Nationalist seat of North Roscommon resulted in a sensational victory for Count Plunkett, father of one of the executed Dublin rebels. Technically, Plunkett was an independent but the platform on which

he stood was similar to that of Sinn Fein. Thereafter Sinn Fein advanced rapidly, winning a further five by-elections in 1917 and 1918.

As Prime Minister, Lloyd George did not abandon his quest for an Irish settlement. In May 1917, he renewed his offer to Redmond for immediate Home Rule for the twenty-six counties, without success. In July, a Convention of Irishmen of various persuasions was set up, to try to evolve a solution. Sinn Fein refused to participate, which considerably weakened its authority. Then in March 1918, John Redmond died from an operation which nobody had expected to present serious risks. So the most experienced, and perhaps the most responsible, Irish politician was suddenly removed from the scene. He was succeeded as Nationalist leader by John Dillon.

In the same month, while the Convention was still sitting, the government faced a different and even graver problem. Russia had collapsed, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk gave the Central Powers huge swathes of Russian territory. In the west, the Germans launched their spring offensive, which at one moment seemed to threaten a similar result in France and Belgium. In desperate straits, Lloyd George's government began to plan a great extension of conscription in Britain, where it had already existed for a couple of years. The government also gave thought to the ideal of applying conscription to Ireland, which had escaped it thus far.

There were anguished debates in the Cabinet about the likely effects of Irish conscription, and various men who were not Cabinet members were invited to give their own views on the matter<sup>7</sup>. Broadly, the military men advised in favour, while those who were concerned with preserving peace in Ireland advised against. Field Marshal Lord French thought that it could be worked 'with a slight augmentation of the existing troops in Ireland', and a somewhat similar view was taken by General Sir Bryan Mahon, the Commander in Chief in Ireland. By contrast, General Byrne, head of the Royal Irish Constabulary, 'had no doubt that (it) would be a mistake; that by passing and





**The Kindest Cut of All**

Welsh Wizard: 'I now proceed to cut this map into two parts and place them in the hat. After a suitable interval they will be found to have come together of their own accord – (aside) – at least let's hope so; I've never done this trick before.' (*Punch*, 10 March 1920)

enforcing such a measure... The Catholics and Nationalists of Ireland would be united against the British Empire'. H.E. Duke (later Lord Merrivale), Chief Secretary for Ireland and a Unionist, thought that 'we might as well recruit Germans'. He believed that the result would be 'the loss of Ireland'. The Lord Chief Justice of Ireland considered that application of conscription to his country would be 'at the cost of tremendous bloodshed', and Sir Edward Carson indicated 'that the number of reliable men that could be got would be very small, as at least two thirds would be anti-British'.

Faced with such opinions, the government might have been expected to drop the whole idea of applying con-

scription to Ireland. In fact they decided in favour, and Lloyd George himself gave the reason to his colleagues. His main concern does not appear to have been with the number of Irish men who might be enlisted, what degree of loyalty they might show, or what the immediate and long-term consequences might be in Ireland, but rather with the apparent necessity to be seen to apply conscription to Ireland, in order to make the new arrangements acceptable in Britain. As he told the Cabinet, 'I do not believe it possible in this country to tear industry apart, to take fathers of 45 and upwards for the forces... without deep resentment at the spectacle of sturdy young Catholics in Ireland... drilling... and compelling

us to keep troops in Ireland... I cannot think of any Liberal doctrine, and I do not think there is any Unionist doctrine, which would justify the application of conscription to this country and not to Ireland'.<sup>8</sup>

The legislation the Prime Minister was seeking would not by itself apply conscription to Ireland. That could only be done by later issuing Orders in Council which would be authorised under the legislation. In practice, the government might very well decide not to issue such an Order at all. Lloyd George had hoped that the Convention which had been established some months earlier would report in a way which would render it possible to make a package deal under which Ireland received Home Rule and also accepted conscription. The Convention's conclusions were published while the parliamentary debate was in progress. They were reached by a thoroughly unconvincing majority of forty-four to twenty-nine, and gave little hope for progress on those lines.

It was immediately obvious that conscription would raise strong opposition from all Irish parties except the Unionists – and, as has been seen, even Carson was profoundly doubtful about the wisdom of the measure. When the matter came before the House of Commons, Asquith warned that it would be 'an act of terrible short-sightedness'. On 12 April, there was an important debate on the proposal during the Committee stage of the government's Bill. The Conservative leader Bonar Law, speaking on behalf of the Coalition Ministry, had already made it clear that if the government did not get its way, it would resign. Asquith was put on the spot, declaring that 'if we were in conditions which even in time of war were normal or anything like normal, I should not hesitate for a moment to support and as far as I could give effect to the opinions which I expressed by appropriate parliamentary action'. In other words, he would have liked to vote against the proposal but felt bound to abstain because the war was at such a critical stage. The government's proposal was carried on the crucial division<sup>9</sup> by 281 votes to 116, plus two tellers each way. The minority included

forty-two Liberals, sixty-four Nationalists, five Independent Nationalists, six Labour and one Unionist. Asquith and his leading supporters duly abstained. Inevitably, Parliament authorised the extension of conscription to Ireland. It was never possible to enforce Irish conscription; but the very threat of it alienated Irish opinion even further. By this time, no doubt many young Irishmen had decided that – if fight they must – they would rather fight to drive the British from Ireland than to drive the Germans from Belgium.

The effect of the argument over Irish conscription on the Liberal Party was profound. Many Liberal MPs, even those who were not pacifists, had been feeling increasingly alienated from the Coalition for a long time, and the fact that so many of them were prepared to vote against the Lloyd George government on an issue of confidence, when Asquith advised abstention, was remarkable. It is possible – though it would be difficult to prove this – that Asquith and his principal supporters now realised that their own authority over the non-Lloyd Georgeite members of their Party would disappear unless they were prepared to come out unambiguously against the Coalition on some suitable issue. This may explain Asquith's decision to divide the House – and the Liberal Party – on the more famous, but much less clear-cut, Maurice issue, just four weeks after the Irish conscription vote. If that is so, then Irish conscription was of massive importance for the whole future of the Liberal Party.

On 11 November 1918 the Armistice was signed, and Lloyd George promptly called a new general election. The Prime Minister's original hope had been that the government which he headed would be an almost universal Coalition. Such hopes were dashed. Asquith had already been invited to join, and was offered the attractive prospect of nominating several Ministers, but he refused to lead his followers into government.<sup>10</sup> When the election was announced, Labour decided to withdraw from the Coalition. Lloyd George's only substantial partners were therefore the Conservatives.

Electoral arrangements during the

period of the campaign were very complex<sup>11</sup>, but the upshot was that the Coalition secured a huge majority, and over two-thirds of those Coalition MPs were Unionists. There were some astonishing casualties. Asquith and his principal followers had not been supported by the Coalition, and all were defeated. Of 162 new MPs, only thirty had been returned without Coalition support. A few even of that little band might be regarded as Coalitionists at heart. The Labour Party, with sixty MPs, made substantial advances; but most of its acknowledged leaders were defeated. In Ireland, the results were even more sensational. Sinn Fein won seventy-three seats, the Unionists twenty-three. The Nationalists were reduced to six (they held a seventh seat in a Liverpool constituency). Only two territorial constituencies in the three southern provinces of Ireland resisted the Sinn Fein tide; Waterford City, where John Redmond's son retained his father's seat by a small majority, and Rathmines, a wealthy constituency near Dublin, which returned a Unionist. Two Labour Unionists and an Independent completed the Irish tally.

The division between pro-Coalition and anti-Coalition Liberals became increasingly sharp as time went on. Early in 1919, the non-Coalition Liberals set up their own House of Commons organisation, with Sir Donald Maclean as Chairman. It is not clear how they should be labelled. They usually called themselves 'Independent Liberals' – independent, that is, of the Coalition. People often called them 'Asquithians', though some were by no means happy with Asquith's leadership. Contemporaries sometimes nicknamed them 'Wee Frees', after a small and exclusive Scottish sect. The Wee Frees regarded themselves as an Opposition party: indeed, for procedural purposes Maclean rather than the Labour Chairman was treated as de facto Leader of the opposition. Early in 1920 Asquith himself was returned to Parliament in a sensational by-election. Soon afterwards, Maclean declared that independent Liberals should be 'at complete liberty to run a candidate' wherever the Liberal candidate or Liberal Association had reached an arrangement with the Con-

servatives – in effect, against any Coalition Liberal – and promised Headquarters support.<sup>12</sup> The split was not a simple division between 'right' and 'left', between purists and trimmers, or even between admirers of Asquith and admirers of Lloyd George. Each group contained people who would eventually become Conservatives (actually or for practical purposes), people who would eventually join Labour and people who would remain Liberals. Each group also contained people who were quite prepared to give their putative leader a rough ride.

The 1914 compromise provided that the Government of Ireland Act would come automatically into effect as soon as the last Peace Treaty was signed. This was palpably out of the question. Sinn Fein, commanding nearly three-quarters of the Irish constituencies, was pledged not to attend Westminster at all. Instead the elected members constituted themselves the Dail Eireann, and met in Dublin on 21 January 1919. Some Sinn Feiners had been elected for more than one constituency, or were in prison, so in all only 27 people answered the call.<sup>13</sup>

On the very day that the Dail met, two policemen were shot dead in Co. Tipperary. Thereafter, violence escalated rapidly. The National Volunteers, who had been formed before the war in order to enforce Home Rule legislation against possible violent resistance from Unionists, transformed themselves into the Irish Republican Army, or IRA.

A Liberal, Ian Macpherson (later Lord Strathcarron) became Chief Secretary for Ireland in January 1919, at almost the very moment when the Dail first met and a new wave of violence began. Dealing with violence was not MacPherson's forte at all, but he was actively employed in working out a political solution for 'the troubles'. In December 1919, the government considered three possible long-term solutions to the Irish problem<sup>14</sup>. The simplest was that a parliament should be set up for Ireland, but that the six most Protestant counties of Ulster should be allowed to vote themselves out of the arrangements, and remain part of the United Kingdom. The second was to set up two Irish

parliaments, one for all the nine counties of Ulster, the other for the remaining three provinces of Ireland. The third was a variant of this, under which only the six most Protestant counties would be represented in the northern parliament. The Cabinet inclined towards a two parliament solution, without committing itself strongly to either variant. To please those people, Irish or British, who hated the idea of partitioning Ireland and leaving substantial disaffected minorities on both sides of the border, a Council of Ireland would also be established, to deal with common problems, and in the hope of ultimately reuniting the country. Some MPs from both parts of the country would continue to be elected to Westminster. Macpherson took charge of the early stages of the government's Bill.

Nationalists and Sinn Feiners were uniformly hostile. Ulster Unionists at first reserved judgement, but then swung in favour. This support, however, was something of an embarrassment to the government, for the Ulstermen made it abundantly clear that they proposed to make partition permanent, which vitiated any remote chance of selling the idea to the other side. Asquith, who had by this time returned to the House of Commons, came out against the partition proposals in March 1920<sup>15</sup>. He drew attention to the attitude of the Ulster Unionists, whose principal spokesman had very recently made it plain that he could not envisage Irish unification taking place 'within the lifetime of any man in the House'. Asquith also raised a great issue which would attract growing interest as time went on, proposing that Ireland should be granted the status of a self-governing Dominion, like Canada or Australia. This plan would allow provision to be made for Ulster – comparable, one might say, with the considerable autonomy enjoyed by the Canadian Provinces or the Australian States.

Progress of the Bill through parliament was protracted, but public interest concentrated much more on the violent episodes which were taking place. MacPherson retired from the post of Chief Secretary in April 1920, becoming Minister of Pensions instead. His

successor, the last man to occupy that 'graveyard of political reputations', was another Liberal, Sir Hamar Greenwood, who moved into the Conservative Party a few years later.

Greenwood did not find the task of dealing with a violent Irish campaign particularly uncongenial. The Royal Irish Constabulary was seriously depleted in numbers, and Greenwood filled the vacant places with men recruited in Britain – mostly ex-soldiers, and sometimes ex-convicts. They constituted the notorious 'Black-and-Tans', who were linked to another body, the Auxiliaries ('Auxies'), composed mainly of ex-officers. The Dail had little control over the IRA, and the British government did not have much over the Black-and-Tans. So atrocities and counter-atrocities became the rule. In November 1920, Asquith charged Greenwood with pursuing a policy of 'reprisals'. One writer sagely observed that Greenwood's 'stonewalling statements (in Parliament) were not unfairly caricatured as 'there is no such thing as reprisals, but they have done a great deal of good''.<sup>16</sup>

It is not difficult to visualise the effect which all this was having on the Liberals, whether Coalitionist ('Coalie') or Wee Free. They were sickened by the atrocities on both sides, and memories of the old Home Rule battles were revived. The division between the two Liberal groups was no longer a somewhat abstract argument over whether the best interests of Liberalism would be served by a tactical Coalition or by total independence. More and more issues of policy were appearing on which Wee Frees took one view and Coalies a different one; but disputes over the Irish question stirred the Liberal Party to its depths. When the National Liberal Federation met at Bradford later in November, this proved the occasion for an anti-Coalition demonstration. A small number of Coalie MPs and a few other Coalitionist delegates were heavily defeated when they sought to amend a resolution condemning the Irish reprisals.

The government's proposal for two Irish parliaments eventually passed into law at the end of 1920, as a new Gov-

ernment of Ireland Act. Elections were held in May 1921. In the South, Sinn Fein was returned unopposed everywhere except for the four Dublin University seats. They refused to participate in the Southern parliament, just as it had refused to attend Westminster. The southern parliament was dead in the water, but the elected candidates were treated as members of a new Dail.

In the northern parliament, 'the Stormont', the Unionists had, predictably, a huge majority. For the fifty-two seats, forty Ulster Unionists, six Nationalists and six Sinn Feiners were returned. As Berkley Farr describes in the article which follows, a pattern was set for Northern Ireland politics which would persist for half a century, and which applied not only to people elected to the Stormont, but to those elected to Westminster as well. Party allegiance was defined essentially on sectarian lines. In practice, Ulster Unionists cooperated closely with Conservatives.

The King was set to open the new Northern Ireland parliament on 22 June 1921. Shortly before he did so, he had discussions with the great South African statesman Jan Smuts, who urged him to make a ringing appeal for reconciliation. After the draft of the

Lloyd George and Lord Derby (Secretary of State for War, 1916–18)



speech had been vetted by others, including Lloyd George, it was duly delivered, and received an eager positive response almost everywhere.

But what was to happen in the South, where the proposed parliament was obviously not going to function? Lloyd George acted over Greenwood's head and on 11 July 1921 a truce was concluded between the British authorities and Sinn Féin. Thereafter there were innumerable discussions involving Irish leaders and members of the British government. By this time Lloyd George himself was veering towards the idea of some sort of 'Dominion' model for the whole of Ireland. Bonar Law, the Conservative leader, ruled it out, and the idea was dropped. In the end, the Prime Minister fell back on a second line. The division between North and South would be accepted as permanent, but the South would be established as a Dominion, with the exception of certain naval bases considered vital for British defence. Eventually, representatives of the Dáil were faced with an ultimatum. Accept a treaty on those lines, or face war in three days. The Irish delegates decided to recommend acceptance.

The necessary legislation passed the House of Commons by 403 votes to sixty. One hundred Coalies and twenty-four Wee Frees supported the Bill; just two Coalies opposed it. The Unionists were more split: 208 supporting it and fifty-three voting against. Of the minority, seventeen sat for Ulster seats and two for Irish University seats. In the House of Lords, the critical vote was on a hostile amendment, which was defeated by 166 to forty-seven. Ratification by the Dáil was more difficult, and a bitter debate took place. Not until 8 January 1922 did the Dáil accept the Treaty, and then by the unconvincing majority of sixty-four to fifty-seven. On these terms, the new Irish Free State was set up.

The Coalitionists, and particularly the Coalition Liberals, rejoiced at the Irish agreement. 'As for the Prime Minister', wrote an author in *The English Review*,<sup>17</sup>

He has won to fame. The settlement is the greatest achievement of his life,

by far the most liberal enactment in modern history ..... Where Parnell struck against granite, where Gladstone failed, where Asquith as party leader never had a chance, this Coalition achieves success ...

If success it was, the credit certainly goes overwhelmingly to the Prime Minister himself. Like Gladstone with the Irish Land Act of 1881, Lloyd George secured his Irish achievement through by-passing his Chief Secretary. The *Lloyd George Liberal Magazine*, dealing with the critical period of the settlement, did not consider Greenwood worthy even of a reference in its index.

Asquith approved of the settlement. 'No one has more reason than we have to rejoice over that agreement', he told a Liberal demonstration January 1922<sup>18</sup>. He could hardly resist going on to point out that the agreement was remarkably similar to what he had been proposing for a couple of years. Nor could he resist commenting on the failure of Liberal Coalitionists to condemn Greenwood for 'letting loose his auxiliaries and his Black and Tans in their retaliatory campaign of arson and outrage'.

And yet few people really liked the arrangement. The Southern Catholics, who wanted a sovereign republic for the whole of Ireland, abhorred both partition and the continued link with the Crown. The Northern Protestants would probably have preferred to remain fully integrated in the United Kingdom, and had never sought a separate parliament for themselves. Protestants in the south, and Catholics in the north, were particularly aggrieved, for they were now powerless minorities in their respective areas. British Conservatives, whose traditional cry had been 'Union', were the dominant members of a government which had thrust upon the unwilling north a measure of Home Rule roughly the same as Redmond and his followers had sought for the whole of Ireland, while the south was receiving much more self-government than the old Nationalists had demanded. British Liberals, who had fought shoulder to shoulder for Home Rule eight years

earlier, had witnessed a bloody war conducted ruthlessly by a Liberal Chief Secretary against a much more intransigent Irish nationalism.

Very soon, the viability of the compromise was called into question. The split in the Dáil led to a new kind of shooting war in Ireland, this time between Catholic 'Free Staters' who reluctantly accepted the new arrangements and Catholic Republicans who repudiated it. The Free Staters won; but it had not been a foregone conclusion that they would. Not until 1927 did the intransigents consent to enter the Dáil, and ten years after that the Treaty was for practical purposes abrogated under the new Éire constitution.

What a tragedy for all concerned that Gladstone's original Home Rule proposals had been rejected in 1886.

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- 1 Asquith to King (draft) 24.vii. 14, *Asquith papers* 7, Bodleian Library, Oxford, pp. 147 – 48.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 27.vii, 149-50.
- 3 F.S.L.Lyons, in *A New History of Ireland*, VI, W.E. Vaughan (ed), Oxford, 1996, p. 144
- 4 F.S.L.Lyons: *John Dillon: a biography*, London, 1968, p. 373.
- 5 George Boyce, in *Lloyd George: twelve essays*, ed. A.J.P.Taylor, London, 1971, p. 137.
- 6 F.S.L.Lyons, in *A New History of Ireland*, VI, W.E. Vaughan (ed), Oxford, 1996, p. 221.
- 7 See, in particular, War Cabinets 372 (25.iii.18), 373 (26.iii.18), 374 and 375 (both 27.iii.18), 376 (28.iii.18) and 377 (29.iii.18). CAB 23/5, P.R.O. Lloyd George's *War Memoirs*, London, 1936, vol 2, pp. 1597-1601, gives a remarkably objective account of the problems involved.
- 8 War Cabinet 385, 6.iv. CAB 23/6.
- 9 104 H.C.Deb. 53, 2001-6. Division No 16, 12.iv.18.
- 10 Memorandum of meeting with Lloyd George 24.ix.18. Elibank papers 8,804, fo. 193-6. National Library of Scotland.
- 11 See discussions by the present author in *The Background to the 'Coupon' election arrangements*, Eng. Hist. Rev. vol. LXXXVI, No. 339 (April 1971), pp. 318 – 36, and *A classification of the Members of Parliament elected in 1918*, Bull. Inst. Hist. Res. Vol. XLVII No. 115 (May 1974), pp. 74 – 9.
- 12 *Liberal Magazine* 1920, p. 167.
- 13 F.S.L.Lyons, in *A New History of Ireland*, VI, W.E. Vaughan (ed), Oxford, 1996, p. 240.
- 14 C 10(19).3.xii.19. CAB 23/18
- 15 See *Liberal Magazine*, 1920, pp. 233 – 37.
- 16 *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1941 – 45, p. 325.
- 17 Cited in *Lloyd George Liberal Magazine* 1922, p. 356.
- 18 *Liberal Magazine* 1922, p. 48.

Despite all the obstacles, Liberalism survived in Northern Ireland after partition. **Berkley Farr** explains how.

# Liberalism in Unionist Northern Ireland

The partition of Ireland and the establishment of a devolved parliament in Northern Ireland in 1921 was a landmark in the history of both Ireland and the Irish impact on British Liberalism. Unionist rule from Belfast replaced the pre-Great War Liberal rule administered via Dublin. Ulster's leading Liberal and champion of Home Rule, Rev J. B. Armour declared that the Unionists 'had yelled about "No Home Rule" for a generation, and then they were compelled to take a form of Home Rule that the Devil himself could never have imagined'.<sup>1</sup> For almost half a century Ireland was to disappear as a major item on Britain's political agenda. Northern Ireland in 1921 was a highly polarised community following the turmoil of the previous years and as such was even less fertile soil than usual for Liberalism. Whilst the Liberal Party in Britain had declined to a shadow of its former self, it was to face virtual extinction in Ulster. Despite having had two MPs before 1918, the party failed to contest any general election up to 1929.<sup>2</sup> It thus missed taking part in the first two Northern Ireland elections of 1921 and 1925 held under proportional representation, as well as in the Westminster elections of the period.

PR by Single Transferable Vote was introduced to both parts of Ireland as part of the settlement in the Government of Ireland Act 1920. The 1921 Northern Ireland election was the first time in Europe that this system was used to elect all the members of a Parliament<sup>3</sup> and the results reflected the polarised position of the time. The Unionists took forty seats with the Nationalists and Sinn Finn taking six each. The second election in 1925 showed how PR could enable a weakening of the two extremes and the creation of a new middle group of MPs. The Republicans were reduced from six to two while the Nationalists went up to ten. The Unionists fell from forty to thirty-two with the new central group of

eight, comprising four Independent Unionists, three Labour and one Unbought Tenant (George Henderson in Co. Antrim).<sup>4</sup>

The Unbought Tenants' Association had been formed over the issue of tenants who had not been included in the 1903 land purchase scheme. Its president was Robert Nathaniel Boyd<sup>5</sup> and when this association developed into the revived Liberal Party for Ulster he was appointed the first president.<sup>6</sup> The land question had been a key issue for Liberals in Ireland since before the days of Gladstone. This was to be the final chapter in the struggle.

The Liberal revival of the late 1920s in Ulster was closely connected with the revival in Britain under Lloyd George and his programme to conquer unemployment. In particular the financing of the 1929 general election from the Lloyd George Fund appears to be a key factor in the number of candidates going forward. In April 1929 there were reports, following a deputation of NI Liberals to London, of a galaxy of candidates. Finance was the principal subject of discussion and there was to be substantial assistance for the imperial but not the local general election.<sup>7</sup> The financing of the Westminster candidates was an issue in the campaign with the Liberals being called remittance men and J. M. Andrews, Craigavon's future successor as Prime Minister, claiming it was unfair that Unionist candidates should be put to the trouble of a contest because Lloyd George had provided £7,000 or £8,000 for the Liberal candidates.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1929 election for the thirteen Westminster seats, the Liberals put forward six candidates, compared with eleven Unionists, three Nationalists and three others.<sup>9</sup> George Henderson MP and R. N. Boyd were leading candidates and were also among the five contesting the Northern Ireland Parliamentary election.

At the start of the campaign Henderson stressed

the need for an effective opposition and declared, 'I think there is a real danger that our politics in the Six Counties will become divided along sectarian lines. That was bad for our country in the past, and, I believe it will be bad for it in the future. The only Opposition that can combat this thing is a party along Liberal lines, that will bring to its support people of progressive thought from every creed and class of the community.'<sup>10</sup> The election slogan 'Not for Class or Creed – But for the Common Good' was used<sup>11</sup> and much emphasis was placed on the economic and farming programmes of the party. Johnston, incidentally, believed that motor taxation should be on the basis of petrol consumption instead of horse power.<sup>12</sup>

When the results were declared the Liberals in Northern Ireland had polled 100,000 votes in the UK election. All six candidates had straight fights with the Unionists and their percentage of the vote ranged from 25 per cent in East Belfast to 33 per cent in Armagh with combined proportions of 26 per cent and 27 per cent in the two-seaters of Antrim in Down.<sup>13</sup> Whilst the results were respectable no candidate was elected and it would be twenty-nine years before another Liberal stood in a Northern Ireland election.

The abolition of PR, except for the four Queen's University seats, resulted in forty years of electoral stagnation under single party government. The vast majority of new constituencies, with some gerrymandering, were safe seats for either Unionists or Nationalists and seldom changed hands. In nine general elections between 1929 and 1965 the number of unopposed MPs varied between nineteen and thirty-three out of fifty-two. In the remaining years of the Stormont Parliament the number of Unionist MPs never fell to the level of thirty-two in the last PR election of 1925 and the middle grouping of non-sectarian plus Independent Unionists never exceeded the eight elected in 1925. The Northern Ireland Labour Party reached a maximum of four MPs in 1958 and 1962.

The period from the 1930s to the 1950s was also the darkest period for the Liberal Party in Britain. Following

the bitter 'Chapelgate' Election in February 1949 a leading Nationalist, Shane Leslie, a cousin of Churchill, wrote to Lady Violet Bonham-Carter: 'If you are alive I presume there is still a Liberal Party!'.<sup>14</sup> He advocated the Liberals making a gesture towards Irish unity that might swing forty seats to them and he suggested Liberals stand again in Ulster. Lady Violet replied in a characteristically forthright manner reminding him of Ireland's neutral stance in the war and stating that the only way to bring Ulster in is to make her *want* to come in. Rejecting the bait, she declared: 'I only want votes to be given and seats to be won for the things I believe in'.<sup>15</sup>

The following year in the 1950 general election the North Down Labour candidate stated in his election leaflet: 'The tragedy of Irish politics is the virtual absence of any Liberal tradition'.<sup>16</sup> His name was Albert McElroy and six years later when the Ulster Liberal Association was reformed he became the driving force behind it and its President until his death in 1975.

The Ulster Liberal Association was reformed in 1956 following a letter to the press and Aubrey Herbert who represented the party in Britain addressed the founding meeting. The first electoral test was in the 1958 Stormont general election when Rev Albert McElroy contested the Queen's University constituency. Nationalists distrusted Liberals because of Lloyd George and partition while Unionists loathed Liberals because of Gladstone, Asquith and Home Rule. McElroy made no apology for his forebears and was convinced that Home Rule in Gladstone's time would have spared Ireland the bloodshed and bitterness of the following century. Standing against three Unionists, an Independent and a Northern Ireland Labour candidate for the four-seat PR constituency, McElroy polled 13 per cent of the first preference votes. This was greater than the Labour and Unionist candidates but the Labour voters' second preferences were insufficient to elect him. The result was promising and helped to spread the Liberal message to the graduate electorate.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1959 Westminster general

election the Liberals decided to contest South Belfast and the candidate was Sheelagh Murnaghan who had made her name as Northern Ireland's only woman barrister and as an international hockey player. Her grandfather had been a Nationalist MP and alongside Albert McElroy from the radical Presbyterian tradition they were the personification of the non-sectarian and progressive message that the Liberals were putting forward. Ulster Liberals were free to have their individual opinions for or against Irish unity but they were the first party to accept that Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the UK could only be changed by a majority of the people wanting to do so. They also advocated a programme of reform in common with the rest of the Liberal Party. *Liberal News* described Sheelagh Murnaghan as the bravest Liberal candidate among all the eleven score and 'a gallant fighter for social unity in a land of sterile conflict'.<sup>18</sup> Conservative South Belfast was not prepared for such a challenge and the 7.5 per cent Liberal vote was a disappointment.

The first Liberal meeting I attended in August 1961 included six other people (the then size of the pre-Orpington Parliamentary Party!) but the meeting nominated Sheelagh Murnaghan to contest the forthcoming by-election at Queen's University. Her November victory in becoming the only Liberal to be elected to the Northern Ireland Parliament was one of the greatest moments in Ulster Liberal history and it placed the Liberals in the forefront of reform throughout the 1960s in the years before the outbreak of 'the troubles'. During her time in Stormont until her university constituency was abolished in 1969 Sheelagh Murnaghan was one of the most active MPs campaigning for reform. On four occasions she introduced a Human Rights Bill despite inevitable defeat by the Unionist majority and she campaigned tirelessly on a wide range of issues including capital punishment, itinerants, and electoral reform. Many of her proposals were eventually to be introduced but only after her reasoned arguments were replaced by violence on the streets.



British and Ulster Liberals at the 1963 Liberal Assembly at Brighton (just after Jo Grimond's 'sound of gunfire' speech). From left: Kina and Eric Lubbock, Richard Moore, Chris Woods, Berkley Farr, Sean Kelly, Bob Huston, Rev. Albert McElroy and Sheelagh Murnaghan MP.

The years following the 1961 by-election were ones of expansion of the organisation and impact of the Ulster Liberals. Around half of the seats in Stormont were unopposed and Liberals tried to pick these, thereby avoiding most of the Belfast seats where the Northern Ireland Labour Party were established. In 1962 four seats were fought in the Stormont general election, the first councillor was elected and a by-election was contested.<sup>19</sup> The party began to have local branches and the NI Federation of Young Liberals was formed. Ulster Liberals had attended Liberal assemblies but they now took part in the regular activities of the various strands of the Liberal Party Organisation. This was a two-way process with visits by Pratap Chitnis and Michael Meadowcroft to advise on organisation and Mark Bonham-Carter and George Scott to speak in the South Belfast by-election.<sup>20</sup>

The 1964 Westminster general election was a major challenge with four of the twelve seats being fought in

four-cornered contests.<sup>21</sup> The result was disappointing but it was the start of a much wider geographical spread of Liberal activity across the province and an increase in the tactics of taking on Unionists where they expected no opposition.

In the 1965 Stormont election Sheelagh Murnaghan achieved the rare status of becoming an unopposed Liberal MP! Bert Hamilton polled 22 per cent in Mid Armagh and Albert McElroy, after a campaign needing police protection during physical disruption of his meetings, gained 34 per cent in Enniskillen. The most interesting result was in Derry City where Claude Wilton, a popular local solicitor and the son of a Unionist mayor, with Devon's Chris Trethewey as agent, won 47 per cent of the vote in an 80 per cent poll losing by 7,418 to the Unionist's 8,432. Northern Ireland's second city had for years felt neglected and disillusioned on many fronts but the decision to locate the second university in Unionist

Coleraine was to galvanise Derry into political action which had long-term consequences. Claude Wilton was one of the few Liberals in Derry but he headed a coalition of people wanting change, and among his supporters were John Hume and Ivan Cooper.

The Westminster election in March 1966 was to prove a major advance for Ulster Liberals, who achieved 29,000 votes in three seats. In North Antrim Richard Moore polled 22 per cent, after fighting four campaigns in England. In South Down John Quinn came second ahead of a Republican, with 19 per cent, while Sheelagh Murnaghan got 22 per cent in North Down after a late entry. In the latter case she polled 10,582 votes without an election address but was helped by the Unionist MP's complaining in his address about the election being forced on the rate-payers by the Liberals. The election was followed by the launch of the monthly *Northern Radical*. Later in 1966 another by-election occurred at Queen's in which Albert McElroy got the highest

ever opposition vote, but there were fewer Unionist abstentions and he lost with 44 per cent.

In 1967 visits by Jeremy Thorpe were soon followed by almost every leading Liberal. Young Liberal branches increased dramatically and following a letter to the press from McElroy, the ULP helped to set up a Liberal Party in the Republic. By-elections were soon fought in Wicklow and East Limerick with help from northern Liberals but the results did not meet local expectations and enthusiasm waned. The problems in Northern Ireland were increasingly exercising the concern of Liberal Party and at the 1967 Blackpool Assembly McElroy proposed an executive resolution urging reforms.

In March 1968 the former Prime Minister Lord Brookeborough resigned his Lisnaskea seat and Liberals seized the opportunity to oppose his son in the by-election. Most Nationalists, however, voted for an Independent Unionist and Stanley Wynne was a disappointing third with 12.5 per cent. As the year wore on politics increasingly moved from the polling station to the streets as the Civil Rights campaign gained momentum. Many Liberals became involved but McElroy did not as he believed it was easier to get people on to the streets than it was to get them off again and he dreaded the descent into bloodlust that the protests might bring.<sup>22</sup>

McElroy's fears were well justified as the street protests became more violent and the community polarised. As O'Neill belatedly tried to introduce reforms that were 'too little and too late' he tried to overcome the opposition of his own Unionist MPs by calling an election in February 1969. Liberals were in an increasingly difficult position with moderate O'Neillite Unionists and others appearing on the scene and in a desire to avoid vote splitting they only contested two seats.<sup>23</sup> Sheelagh Murnaghan had proposed trying to create a popular front of reformist parties but she and McElroy were too radical in their views for some Liberals who were key players in forming the O'Neillite New Ulster Movement which subsequently evolved into the Alliance Party.

The appearance of troops on the streets of Derry and Belfast in August 1969 utterly changed the situation from a solely Northern Ireland problem to a British one. At Brighton the following month McElroy declared to the Liberal Assembly that we were not dealing with a rational body of political thought but a state of mind bordering on a psychosis. He expressed his personal hope for a united Ireland based on a union of Irish hearts not lit by a Celtic twilight or Orange midnight, but outward looking in a united Europe.<sup>24</sup>

Violence struck the Liberals in February 1970 when a bomb exploded outside Sheelagh Murnaghan's house and the polarisation of society was reflected in the June Westminster election.<sup>25</sup> Despite an electoral collapse, Liberals continued to play an active role campaigning for reforms and when Stormont was suspended Whitelaw appointed Sheelagh Murnaghan to his Advisory Commission. Whitelaw accepted almost all the ULP proposals, including STV, but Liberals gained no electoral benefit.<sup>26</sup> The Ulster Liberal Party continued as a political entity until it becoming part of the Liberal Democrats but it was only to contest one further election, with James Murray in 1979.<sup>27</sup>

What is the Liberal legacy in the homeland of Paddy Ashdown and Lembit Öpik? When Albert McElroy died the Irish Times declared 'he championed the cause of justice, equality and fair play in Northern Ireland a very long time before it was profitable or popular'.<sup>28</sup>

*Berkley Farr is a former Ulster Liberal Party chairman, and was candidate for South Down in 1973.*

- 1 W. S. Armour, *Armour of Ballymoney*, 1934, p. 332.
- 2 The last Irish Liberal to be returned to Westminster was unopposed in 1914 following the death of the winner of 1913 Londonderry City by-election.
- 3 James Knight and Nicholas Baxter-Moore, *Northern Ireland The Elections of the Twenties*, 1972.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Boyd had been Liberal candidate for South Tyrone in December 1910 when he polled 47 per cent, losing by 300 votes.

- 6 *Northern Whig*, 18 May 1929.
- 7 *Northern Whig 'London Letter'*, 13 April 1929. The election for the Northern Ireland Parliament was held on 22 May, eight days before the Westminster election.
- 8 *Northern Whig*, 23 May 1929.
- 9 George Henderson MP and R. N. Boyd contested Co Antrim (two seats), R. D. Pollock and David Johnston (First President of the Ulster Farmers' Union) fought Co Down, W. R. Todd fought Armagh and Capt. Denis Ireland (later to be a well-known writer and first northern resident in the Irish Senate) stood in East Belfast. In the election for the Northern Ireland Parliament Henderson fought Bannside, Boyd North Antrim, Johnston East Down, Todd Mid-Armagh and James Boyd Ards.
- 10 *Northern Whig*, 20 April 1929.
- 11 D. Johnston and Ireland election addresses.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 In the Northern Ireland Parliament election, with PR abolished, Henderson polled 38 per cent in Bannside with Boyd getting 40 per cent in N Antrim, Todd 29 per cent in Mid-Armagh, J Boyd 11 per cent in Ards and Johnston 44 per cent in E Down. Bannside and Ards were three-cornered fights involving Labour candidates.
- 14 Mark Pottle, *Daring to Hope: the diaries & letters of Violet Bonham-Carter 1946-1969*.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Gordon Gillespie, *Albert H. McElroy: the Radical Minister*, reviewed in this issue.
- 17 Gordon Gillespie, *The Ulster Liberal Party 1956-73*, MSS dissertation, QUB.
- 18 *Liberal News*, 1 October 1959.
- 19 Sheelagh Murnaghan was elected on the first count at Queen's with 25 per cent of the vote; Albert McElroy polled 29 per cent in Ards, Arthur Burns 31 per cent in North Down and Judith Rosenfield got 13 per cent in the three-cornered Ballynafeigh (S. Belfast) contest. Brian Wimpess became the first elected councillor in Bangor and Bob Huston polled 13 per cent against both Unionist and Labour in the December Cromac by-election.
- 20 Bert Hamilton polled 10 per cent of the vote in the October 1963 by-election.
- 21 Giles Fitzherbert, a son-in-law of Evelyn Waugh, polled 11 per cent in Fermanagh and South Tyrone despite physical attacks. Major Hamilton Simonds-Gooding polled 10 per cent in South Down, McElroy 6 per cent in North Down and Rosenfield 5 per cent in South Belfast.
- 22 Op. cit.
- 23 Sheelagh Murnaghan, on the abolition of her Queen's seat, got 15 per cent in North Down in a straight fight while Claude Wilton polled 35 per cent and lost by only 710 votes in Derry City with an O'Neillite coming third.
- 24 Op. cit.
- 25 As Paisley took North Antrim Richard Moore's vote fell to 4 per cent while in South Down John Quinn polled 12 per cent. Simonds-Gooding in North Down and Rodney Smith in South Antrim only got 1 per cent of the vote.
- 26 In the first PR elections for the Assembly in 1973 the votes for Sheelagh Murnaghan in South Belfast and myself in South Down were around the 1 per cent level.
- 27 It was felt that the party with the longest pro-European record should fight the first European election but the result was still under 1 per cent.
- 28 *Irish Times*, editorial, 15 March 1975.



1971 – 1985

The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland was born in the midst of the Troubles, in April 1970. **Denis Loretto** looks back at the party's history and its relationships with the Liberal Party and the SDP.

# Alliance, Liberals and the SDP

## A Personal Memoir

On the 9th of October 1968 I was drawn to my office window in Belfast by a commotion outside – hundreds of boisterous young people were heading down Linenhall Street. As I went to the door and looked out they responded to shouts from the front and all sat down in the street. They had been barred from access to the City Hall. The autumn sun beamed down on the peaceful but determined scene. At that moment I realised that the bitter realities of my native province had invaded my cosy world. At some point I would have to become involved.

What I had witnessed was the protest of Queens University students against the brutal sweeping from the Derry streets of a civil rights march four days earlier – the one that sent the first appalling TV images around the world. On that afternoon the People's Democracy was formed by those students. On the same day the Derry Citizens Action Committee was founded with John Hume as its Vice-Chairman.

My own political experience was limited to a couple of years in the Liberal Party in 1961/62 when I had gone to work in London. As it happened I lived in Orpington, Kent, and worked in the famous by-election campaign – heady days! Upon return to Northern Ireland I avoided politics like so many business and professional people of non-partisan view. There was a weak Ulster Liberal Party but it seemed to have no relevance in the local sectarian scene. I had sympathy with the civil rights movement but saw how easily it could be subverted by forces more concerned with 'Brits Out' than human rights.

It was the formation of the New Ulster Movement (NUM) which provided the vehicle for me. I

was there at the first meeting on 5th February 1969 and was attracted to the agenda put forward – chaos was at hand and it was up to the Northern Irish people themselves to put aside their sterile divisions and build the solution. The root problem was sectarianism. A combination of absolute equality and involvement for Protestants and Catholics and respect for the rule of law was paramount. Attacks on the majority view on the link with Great Britain were part of the problem and not the solution. The immediate objective was to support the reform programme and to recruit across the province members of all political parties and none. Adding spice to the meeting was the announcement the same day that Terence O'Neill had called a general election for the Stormont parliament.

I knew no-one on the platform but soon realised that some Liberal Party members – notably Oliver Napier – were the driving force. Their reward was expulsion from the Ulster Liberal Party who evidently regarded this as heresy of some sort.

It is often forgotten that O'Neill actually won the 'Crossroads' election on 24th February 1969 in that twenty-seven out of the thirty-nine Unionists elected supported his reform programme. However they were a mixture of Official and Unofficial Unionists and the divisions at the grass roots were serious. Three Nationalists were dislodged by Independents identified with the civil rights movement including Hume. Sheelagh Murnaghan who had held a seat for the Liberals since 1961 under the anachronistic University franchise was only able to muster 15% of the vote in North Down.

During 1969 NUM built an active organisation with thousands of members drawn from all sections

of the community. It issued many influential papers. It was the first to call for a Community Relations Commission and a Central Housing Executive. But its more radical members were becoming dissatisfied with a Movement. They wanted a new political party. O'Neill had resigned in April and was replaced by the ineffectual Chichester-Clark. The reform programme was continually overtaken by events including the major unrest in Derry's Bogside that brought the British Army on to the streets and led to the formation of the Provisional IRA. Loyalist attacks on Catholic homes proliferated.

The current political structure was not going to work. Without any publicity a sixteen-strong group was formed late in 1969 consisting of NUM members plus representatives of the 'Parliamentary Associations' which had formed around unofficial pro-O'Neill candidates in the February 1969 election. Behind the scenes it worked on the logistics of forming a political party from the ground up. I was proud to be a member of 'The Group' and had no doubt that launch was now only a matter of timing. It was the two by-elections on 16th April 1970 that gave us the signal. Paisley took O'Neill's former seat Bannside. In South Antrim Paisley's deputy Beattie won but an unknown candidate David Corkey standing as an Independent backed by NUM activists gained over 25% of the vote and was just behind the Official Unionist candidate. Paisley had made his entrance into elective politics and moderate unionism had no answer.

In a hectic weekend we wrote a declaration of intent containing the founding principles of the party plus all the supporting documentation for a press launch on Tuesday 21st April. The name of the party was one of the more contentious issues. In the end 'Alliance' was chosen because it was new, avoided any partisan flavour and would fit into a newspaper headline unabridged! In the declaration of intent we repudiated not only the Unionist and Nationalist parties 'for whom the clock stopped in 1920' but also the Labour and Liberal parties 'who have palpably failed to restart that clock'. Later we acknowledged that the Labour and

Liberal parties had made some attempt to cut across sectarian divisions 'but with doctrinaire policies geared to the general British political scene they have failed to solve the fundamental problems on their own doorstep. They have tended to divide moderate and liberal people on economic issues rather than uniting them to fight against sectarianism and the past.'

In drafting the founding principles we majored on healing community divisions but knew we must also be unequivocal on the British link. Vacillation on this issue was one of the defects of the Ulster Liberal Party. We knew that the majority of Catholics were prepared to settle for true equality and cultural freedom within a province largely running its own affairs within the United Kingdom. All that has happened since - up to and including the Good Friday agreement - has borne this out. For many years, both North and South of the border, clamour for breaking the British link has always peaked at times when there seemed to be no hope of a place in the sun for Northern Catholics.

It is worth quoting the founding principles of the Alliance Party in full:

1. We support the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom. We know that this belief is shared by the overwhelming majority of our people and that provocative debate about it has been a primary cause of our most fundamental troubles. The Union is in the best economic and social interests of all citizens of the state. It also implies British standards of democracy and social justice which will be energetically secured and steadfastly upheld. We are firmly committed to the principle of devolved government and would not support any attempt to suspend or dissolve the Northern Ireland Parliament.

2. Our primary objective is to heal the bitter divisions in our community by ensuring -

- (a) Equality of citizenship and of human dignity;
- (b) The rooting out of discrimination and injustice;

- (c) The elimination of prejudice by a just and liberal appreciation of the beliefs and fears of different members of the community;
- (d) Equality of social, economic and educational opportunities;
- (e) Highest standards of democracy at both parliamentary and local government level;
- (f) Complete and effective participation in our political, governmental and public life at *all* levels by people drawn from both sides of our present religious divide.

3. Our economic policies will not be shackled by any economic dogma, whether socialist or conservative. The Alliance Party will never accept any such socio-economic allegiance. Nor is there any intention or desire whatever to affiliate with any other party.

4. We firmly believe that without universal respect for the law of the land and the authorities appointed to enforce it there can be no measurable progress. We therefore intend to secure the rapid achievement of such respect and the absolutely equal enforcement of the law without fear or favour in every part of the state. Equal justice will be guaranteed to all citizens regardless of their political or religious persuasion.

The party launch brought a positive response from NUM members and others of like mind. The leadership rapidly got on with building a province-wide organisation with over 10,000 card-carrying members. Some feelers had been put out to civil rights activists - John Hume received a tumultuous reception when he addressed a NUM meeting in East Belfast in 1969 - but they kept their distance. It was a great disappointment to us that they got together with Nationalist members later the same year - on 21st August 1970 - to form the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). It had constructive intent and its advocacy of a United Ireland was only by consent. Clearly SDLP would get major backing from Catholics. But it would never be able to attract cross-community support and would always feel the danger of being outbid by the

forces of militant republicanism. Earlier there was a Westminster general election within two months of the Alliance Party launch. Given the orientation of Alliance towards devolved government the decision was made to hold fire and not to expose the fledgling party to a contest for which they would be unprepared. Liberal candidates stood in two of the twelve seats and came bottom of the poll in both. Paisley continued his advance by winning the North Antrim seat.

Against the background of continuing unrest, with Republican no-go areas being matched by growing loyalist militancy, Alliance spokesmen gained respect – particularly Oliver Napier and Bob Cooper. In April 1971 the party showed its strength by staging its first annual conference with nearly 2,000 members packing the Ulster Hall. The slogan was ‘Towards Government’ and that was our firm intent while having no illusions about how long it would take. We needed the impetus of high expectation to keep the adrenalin flowing in those crusading days.

Throughout 1971 escalating violence in the streets dominated further attempts at political progress. Despite hopeful signs of understanding emerging between SDLP and the Unionist Government now led by Brian Faulkner, SDLP became hooked on a demand for an enquiry into the deaths of two men shot by the Army in Derry. This led to their withdrawal from Stormont and setting up of the rather bizarre ‘Assembly of the Northern Irish People’ in Dungiven Co. Tyrone.

On 9th August the fateful step was taken to introduce internment without trial to sweep up suspect IRA volunteers. As 350 were taken into custody the Alliance leadership was faced with its first major dilemma. While most Catholics would be incensed by this move it was likely that the majority of Protestants would see it as a necessary measure to crush IRA violence which had caused most of the thirty deaths that year. At an emergency meeting of the party Executive we decided that an appalling error had been made which would increase rather than diminish violence and unrest. In any case the Party’s principles were clear – this was the

antithesis of ‘absolutely equal enforcement of the law’. An immediate statement was issued totally condemning the measure and warning of the inevitable consequences. On the same evening Alliance leaders travelled throughout the province and addressed hastily organised meetings of the party membership in an attempt to ward off any possible split on this emotive issue. In the event we lost no members. Not only had we given firm leadership but also our Protestant members asked their Catholic colleagues how they felt about the internment decision – and understood.

It was not long before our grim predictions came true. Between 9th August and the end of the year a further 143 people had been killed including forty-six members of the security forces. On 30th January 1972 the appalling debacle of Bloody Sunday when thirteen civilians were shot dead in Derry by British soldiers sent shock waves around the world. Shortly afterwards Alliance acquired a parliamentary party when the Stormont MPs Phelim O’Neill (Unionist), Bertie McConnell (Independent Unionist) and Tom Gormley (Independent Nationalist) left their former allegiances and joined the party. However this was short-lived as the refusal of Faulkner and his colleagues to accept the transfer of law and order powers to Westminster led to the suspension of the Stormont Parliament on 24th March 1972. Direct rule commenced under Secretary of State William Whitelaw.

After brief ceasefires violence continued unabated including Bloody Friday in Belfast on 21st July when twenty-six IRA bombs killed eleven and injured 130 people. Ulster Vanguard was formed as a symbol of loyalist resistance and ideas for some form of independence for the province began to surface. The British Government under Ted Heath decided to move rapidly towards testing the ground for restoration of some form of devolution.

In September 1972 a conference was held at Darlington to examine the options. As usual several parties including in this case SDLP and Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) refused to attend and only the Faulkner-led Official Unionists, Alliance and Northern Ireland

Labour turned up. Not surprisingly there was no agreement but the opportunity was taken by Alliance to put forward detailed proposals for an assembly and devolved government based on proportionality and without security powers in the initial stages. We also argued strongly for no severing of the link with Great Britain without the support of a majority of Northern Ireland voters and co-operation with the Republic of Ireland through an advisory Anglo-Irish Council involving Westminster MPs as well as members of the NI Assembly. Although not invited to the conference the Ulster Liberal Party made a submission on similar lines but with a Joint Council between Northern Ireland and the Republic only rather than an Anglo-Irish Council.

When the Government produced a Green Paper in October it was clear that much of this had been taken aboard. The ‘Irish Dimension’ was clearly going to be the most contentious issue. Prior to the publication of a White Paper the Government decided to hold a ‘border poll’ on 8th March 1973 – no doubt with the intention of demonstrating clearly to those pressing for Irish unity where majority opinion stood. Once again the Alliance Party leadership was faced with a difficult decision. It was one thing to have a party principle which supported the British link as the majority view but quite another to campaign in its favour in a referendum. Should we keep a low profile? As with internment two years earlier we stuck to our principles by giving political leadership and issuing a province-wide leaflet headed ‘Without Britain we’re sunk!’ We spelled out the alternatives as ‘a Sinn Fein United Ireland or a Vanguard Independent Ulster’ and mentioned the beneficial implications of membership of the European Community which the UK and Ireland had joined at the beginning of that year.

The reaction of both SDLP and hardline republicans to the border poll was to call for abstention from voting – always a useful ploy when defeat is inevitable because the usual proportion of the electorate who do not bother to vote can be claimed as supporters. In the event the percentage poll was 58.7% with 98.9% saying ‘yes’ to the

British link. But interestingly this positive vote was 57.5% of the entire electorate – enough to demonstrate that a significant number of Catholic voters had actually voted ‘yes’. The Alliance leadership felt justified but the poll was of little benefit and has not been repeated since.

When the White Paper was published a power sharing Executive drawn from an Assembly elected by single transferable vote and without security powers was to the fore. The shape and size of the Irish Dimension was left for further discussion and negotiation at a conference to be held after elections to the new Assembly between its representatives and those of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The White Paper divided the Unionists but Faulkner did manage to get a majority to accept it as a way forward. It was also largely accepted by SDLP and Alliance. While Paisley’s DUP rejected it, they did decide to contest elections to the new Assembly.

But first (on 30th May 1973) came the elections to the twenty-six new district councils forming part of the revised system of local government proposed by the Macrory Report in 1970. This was the first use of STV as a voting system since it was removed by the Unionist regime shortly after the creation of Northern Ireland in the 1920s. The Alliance Party fought an energetic province-wide campaign. Our level of expectation in those early days was such that any result short of an Alliance landslide would have been a disappointment! In the event we secured sixty-three of the 526 seats with 13.6% of the first preference vote. We gained representation on twenty of the twenty-six councils. Interestingly DUP were behind us with twenty-one seats and SDLP not enormously ahead of us with eighty-three seats.

On 28th June 1973 came the Assembly elections. Although only a month after the local government contest, tribal loyalties strengthened in a battle that would in effect appoint negotiating representatives. The Alliance first preference vote slipped to 9.2% but good transfers on later counts helped to secure eight of the seventy-eight seats. To the great credit of the party, Alliance

ran the Catholic Oliver Napier in largely Protestant East Belfast and the Protestant Bob Cooper in largely Catholic West Belfast and both were elected. Napier was elected as Alliance Party leader with Cooper as his deputy. On the Unionist/Loyalist side there was a multiplicity of party labels but in effect twenty-three members supporting the White Paper were elected and twenty-seven against. SDLP surged to nineteen seats.

Despite the bitter Unionist divisions a remarkable breakthrough was announced on 21st November 1973 after lengthy negotiations – a power-sharing Executive involving Unionists, SDLP and Alliance with Faulkner as Chief Executive and SDLP leader Gerry Fitt as his deputy. Alliance had two members – Oliver Napier and Bob Cooper. Only two weeks later the conference envisaged in the White Paper to negotiate the ‘Irish Dimension’ commenced at Sunningdale. During those two weeks I felt euphoric. The key was the entry of SDLP into an Executive before the conference started. To their supporters, the achievement of power-sharing was a glittering prize. For their representatives to come back from Sunningdale to announce they had thrown this away because of some detail of Southern involvement in Northern affairs was inconceivable. To me this factor gave Faulkner the leverage he needed to ward off an over-strong Irish Dimension which would destroy his prospects of selling the whole package to Unionists.

History now shows that Faulkner tragically underplayed his hand. Under the combined pressure of British and Irish Governments and the SDLP he conceded too much. Alliance representatives did their best to seek a better balance but could not in the end be seen to stymie an accord that all the other parties endorsed. So agreement was announced. In the resulting mayhem it was notable that the over-weighty Council of Ireland was the target of Unionist dissidents – little was said about the power-sharing Executive. Triumphalism by some SDLP spokesmen – utterly unnecessary in selling the agreement to their people – sounded appalling to Unionist ears.

Typical quote – ‘It is a vehicle trundling inevitably through to a United Ireland’. It was not surprising that a majority of the Unionist Council voted against the Sunningdale package in January 1974. Faulkner resigned as their leader and was replaced by Harry West.

Faulkner carried on as Chief Executive with a group of ‘Pro-Assembly Unionists’ around him. But his efforts to gain gradual public support for this brave and novel form of devolution were dealt a crippling blow by the man who had most pressurised him into agreement at Sunningdale – British Prime Minister Ted Heath. Harried by industrial unrest Heath called a snap general election for 28th February 1974 with the theme ‘Who governs Britain’. It was disastrous for him in that Labour headed by Harold Wilson narrowly won the election. It was even more disastrous to his Northern Ireland policy in that the united forces of all Unionist parties opposed to Sunningdale secured eleven of the twelve N.I. seats under the banner of the United Ulster Unionist Council (UUUC) with 51.1% of the vote. Their slogan ‘Dublin is just a Sunningdale away’ played well to Unionist fears. In an effort to avoid splitting the pro-agreement vote Alliance stood in only three seats and made little impact.

After that it was only a matter of time before the Executive collapsed even though it proved in its short reign to be a competent administration. In May 1974 the so-called Ulster Workers’ Council strike was feebly handled by a Labour Government instinctively opposed to strike-breaking and the Unionist members of the N.I. Executive resigned. Many years and many lives were to pass before anything resembling a political settlement surfaced again. During the rest of the 1970s Labour continued in government at Westminster, reinforced by a further general election in October 1974 that changed little in Northern Ireland. Again Alliance had limited involvement fighting five seats and gaining a rather distant second place in four.

Secretary of State Merlyn Rees attempted to find a way forward by means of an elected Constitutional Convention of the same size as the previous Assembly. In the election on 1st May 1975 Alliance

again won eight seats with 9.8% of the vote. The massive vote of 54.8% and forty-seven of the seventy-eight seats for UUUC candidates dictated the outcome of the subsequent negotiations – total failure after ten months. In September 1976 Roy Mason succeeded Merlyn Rees as Secretary of State. Both of them concentrated on combating the unremitting violence from both extremes. An IRA ceasefire in early 1975 came to nothing and some major explosions were perpetrated by Republicans in Great Britain. Escalating security powers brought no relief.

The formation of the Peace People in 1976 was a welcome reaction by ordinary people against violence and Alliance members took part in all of its rallies. Without any drive at political level it ultimately gained little. However a more lasting initiative was taken by a group of parents who formed ‘All Children Together’ as a pressure group for integrated education. They sponsored an enabling bill which was introduced in the House of Lords by Alliance Party Peer Lord Dunleath. This became the Education (Northern Ireland) Act in early 1978 and led to the founding of Lagan College with twenty-eight pupils. Today there are forty-six shared schools in the province educating 15,000 Protestant and Catholic children together – a beacon of hope for the future.

On 18th May 1977 came the second round of elections to the twenty-six district councils just after an abortive strike by loyalists against government security policy. It proved to be the best overall performance by the Alliance Party. We moved up from sixty-three to seventy seats and 14.4% of the vote. In Belfast Alliance secured thirteen of the fifty-one seats including my own entry into local government. This performance was to lead to David Cook being elected as the first non-Unionist Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1978/79. But on went the violence and measures to combat it that were the subject of constant controversy. Amid the tribal clamour Alliance spokesmen made consistent efforts to put forward non-partisan views based on the rule of law. In the Maze Prison republican prisoners began to engage in ‘dirty’ protests

against their treatment – something that would have immense significance later on.

On 3rd May 1979 came the Westminster general election that brought Margaret Thatcher to power. Alliance decided to fight every seat but to concentrate effort on target seats – particularly East Belfast with Oliver Napier as candidate. With the Unionist vote very evenly split between Craig (Official Unionist) and Robinson (DUP) we saw an opportunity to come through the middle. In the end after a three-way recount Robinson was elected with 15,994 votes, Craig was second with 15,930 votes and Napier was third with 15,066 votes. Bearing in mind that there were also moderate Unionist and NI Labour candidates with votes totalling 4,000 it was a very close run thing. As the constituency organiser I was bitterly disappointed. The gaining of representation at Westminster level would have been an immense boost for the Alliance Party and would undoubtedly have improved the battered image of the province. In fact the election within NI changed nothing.

But the change of power in the UK overall was to prove highly significant. A month later on 7th June 1979 the first poll for the European Parliament saw Paisley (DUP), Hume (SDLP) and Taylor (OUP) elected to the three seats. In such a province-wide tribal contest it was not surprising that Napier only polled 6.8% – probably not helped by the highly pro-European stance of the Alliance Party.

As Secretary of State the only real initiative by Humphrey Atkins was to convene an inter-party conference in October 1980 that was as usual boycotted – this time by the Official Unionists. After three months of discussion between DUP, SDLP and Alliance the conference broke up without agreement. However Margaret Thatcher became personally involved when the protesting republican prisoners in the Maze started hunger strikes in an attempt to gain recognition as political prisoners. Their irresistible force met in Thatcher an immovable object. At first the strikes were called off. Then in March 1981 Bobby Sands refused food. By the time this new protest was

called off ten prisoners were dead. While still in prison Bobby Sands won a by-election for the Fermanagh-South Tyrone seat and therefore died as a Westminster MP and a powerful martyr to the republican cause. This tragic episode inevitably deepened community divisions.

The May 1981 district council elections were held just two weeks after Bobby Sands’ funeral. The DUP made major advances and the Alliance Party lost ground – down to thirty-eight seats and 8.9% of the first preference vote. While on one hand Thatcher was taking a rigid stance on hunger strikes she was at the same time seeking rapport with the Republic of Ireland Government. In December 1980 she took three senior Cabinet Ministers to Dublin and set up joint studies on a range of subjects. In November 1981 she agreed with the Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald to set up a British-Irish Intergovernmental Council. The moves that were to culminate in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 had begun.

James Prior took over as Secretary of State in September 1981. His initiative took the form of an Assembly with only advisory and consultative functions initially but able to gain real power in specific areas if a weighted majority (70%) agreed on this. It became known as ‘rolling devolution’. This time it was SDLP who decided to boycott but did stand for election on an abstentionist ticket. The same stance was taken by Sinn Fein who were thus fighting a ‘Stormont’ election for the first time. The election on 20th October 1982 was on the same basis as the previous Assembly and Convention. Sinn Fein took five seats and 10.1% of the vote against SDLP’s fourteen seats and 18.8% of the vote. Alliance managed to improve to ten seats with 9.3% of the vote. One of the new Alliance members was John Cushnahan, previously General Secretary of the party and a Belfast City Councillor. He was appointed Chief Whip and began to play a prominent role.

At this stage I was back in London having been promoted to an executive position in the insurance company for whom I had always worked. I retained my Alliance Party membership but

agreed when asked to act as an adviser to the Liberal Northern Ireland panel. I kept in touch with N.I. affairs particularly through contact with John Cushnahan. The Ulster Liberal Party still existed but was very weak. The national party had spoken out against violence and sectarianism and supported moves towards partnership during the 1970s but had little influence on affairs. Then at the Liberal Party Conference in September 1983 a resolution put forward by the Young Liberals was passed. It sought to commit the party to a United Ireland as a long term objective without any wording requiring consent from the N.I. people – a policy only Sinn Fein espoused within Ireland itself.

By this time the Liberals were in alliance with the newly-formed SDP and it was clear to David Steel and David Owen that a properly considered Northern Ireland policy was essential. In March 1984 they set up a Joint Commission on Northern Ireland chaired by Lord Donaldson. I was invited to be a member and we got down to work. In the meantime the Alliance Party had begun to attend meetings of the European Liberal Democrats and this led to David Steel coming to Belfast on 17th May 1984 to endorse the candidature of David Cook in the forthcoming European Parliamentary election.

Later that year as the Assembly at Stormont struggled to establish a worthwhile role Oliver Napier decided to step down after an immensely hard-working and courageous ten years as Party Leader. His distinguished service was subsequently recognised by the award of a knighthood. Fortunately in John Cushnahan he had a worthy successor. Cushnahan was elected on 24th September and soon established good relations with the press and other politicians. When the Joint Commission published its report in July 1985 Cushnahan recognised in it much that the Alliance Party could support and approached the Liberal/SDP leadership for talks. This gradually led to a high degree of co-operation.

Some years later Alliance was recognised as a sister party of the Liberal Democrats and attempts to maintain a

separate branch of the national party in Northern Ireland ceased with the full approval of the remaining local Liberal/SDP members. As to the Joint Commission report, I quote from a lengthy *Irish Times* leader of 23rd July 1985:

The Report ... is one of the most important documents published on the Anglo-Irish question in recent years ... it shows signs of hard work, rigorous thinking and a commendable attempt at objective analysis.

The report set out in detail how power sharing could work and was forthright in defence of civil rights and the rule of law including the conduct of justice. While stating that the status quo was not an option it upheld the principle of consent in pursuing change. It formed the core of Northern Ireland policy eventually inherited by the Liberal Democrats.

On 12 October 1984 the dramatic attempt on Margaret Thatcher's life at a Brighton hotel brought out her best qualities of courage and determination. Far from being deterred from the ongoing Anglo-Irish talks she stepped up the process behind the scenes. On 15th November 1985 she and Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald signed the historic Anglo-Irish Agreement. The key feature of the Agreement was that it gave the Republic a role in Northern Ireland affairs by setting up a Joint Ministerial Conference with a permanent secretariat. But it made clear that all of this could be altered if and when devolution on a power-sharing basis within Northern Ireland was achieved.

The Unionists were faced with the reality that continued intransigence on power-sharing would not necessarily result in the relatively comfortable option of permanent direct rule from Westminster.

The reaction of Unionists was immediate and bitterly hostile. As well as street protests culminating in an attempted strike and shameful attacks on police and their families by loyalist extremists, all fifteen Unionist MPs resigned their seats and caused by-elections. The only result of this tactic was to lose two of their seats to the SDLP. Through all this the Government and security forces held firm.

Cushnahan was faced with an important decision. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was one of the few issues on which real disagreement emerged within Alliance. The lack of consultation with Unionists and the danger of repeating the 1974 mistake of an over-strong Irish Dimension caused dissent. Cushnahan led from the front. He spelled out to his members that while consent on the British link itself was sacrosanct – as the Agreement re-emphasised – it was absolutely vital to break the Unionist veto on all forms of political progress. The Agreement could be the key to achieve that. Backed by a clear majority he indicated broad support for the Agreement. While another long period was to pass and many more tragedies were to befall the province, history will show that the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement was a major factor in drawing the Unionists into the negotiations culminating twelve years later in the Good Friday Agreement.

Looking back over this period in the history of the Alliance Party it could be argued that purity of purpose and firm adherence to principle was taken to the point of rigidity. Perhaps a greater flexibility and occasional bending towards popular opinion on one side or another could have brought more electoral success. I would argue that it was and still is crucially necessary for at least one organisation of strength and integrity to occupy the true centre ground in Northern Ireland politics. While liberal, outward-looking and willing to work closely with kindred spirits in the Liberal Democrats it must clearly be a product of the province itself. As Alliance spokesmen have said many times –

We do not just call for partnership between Protestants and Catholics.

We ARE partnership between Protestants and Catholics.

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# Reviews

## Legacy of famine

**Peter Gray: *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843–50* (Irish Academic Press, 1999)**

**Reviewed by Iain Sharpe**

The Irish Famine is one of the few nineteenth-century historical events that continues to generate controversy in contemporary politics: witness Tony Blair's apology to the Irish people for the famine or Governor Pataki's prescription for teaching the famine as deliberate genocide in New York schools. This powerful legacy has its impact on historians too. The best-known book about the famine, Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger*, has been criticised for its emotive style and emphasis on blame; especially for the demonisation of Charles Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary to the Treasury during the famine years. At the same time, academic historians of the famine who have taken a more detached tone have been criticised for 'desensitising the trauma'.

It is to Peter Gray's credit, therefore, that he has avoided either of these pitfalls. He is not afraid to allocate blame and to make judgements – some of them very severe on British policy-makers – yet he avoids using the famine to force a wider point about British rule in Ireland. He also deserves praise for breaking new ground in famine studies. While there has been a lot of work on the administrative, social and economic explanations for the famine, Gray focuses on the high politics of the period and in particular on the decision-making of the British cabinet, both Tory and Whig/Liberal, during the 1840s. In doing so he places responsibility where it belongs, with the government rather than with the

local or national administrators. Charles Trevelyan, who has often been cast as the chief villain in the famine saga, is by no means exonerated by Gray, but his role is placed in its proper perspective.

The central irony of the book is that it should be a government led by Lord John Russell that presided over this great tragedy. Among British politicians Russell had been the most consistent advocate of 'justice for Ireland': the belief that Irish Catholics could only be reconciled to the union with Great Britain if they were seen to have genuine religious equality and have a chance to play a full part in the government of the country. Gray categorises Russell's views as 'Foxite', based on the tradition of Charles James Fox. Under the Melbourne administration of 1835–41, Foxite Whigs had dominated Irish policy. Catholics were promoted to important positions within the government, an Irish Poor Law was enacted, a non-sectarian Irish constabulary was established and there was no recourse to coercive legislation to keep the peace.

Therefore, as Jonathan Parry describes earlier in this issue, when Russell took office as prime minister in July 1846, after five years of Conservative administration under Peel, the prospects for conciliation in Ireland had never looked brighter. Russell promised a 'golden age' with a 'large and comprehensive' scheme of reforms. These were to include state endowment of the Catholic Church, a widening of the franchise and land

reform. The formation of the Russell administration was welcomed by Daniel O'Connell who had joined forces with the Whigs to bring down Peel. Yet by the time Russell left office in 1852 his government had presided over an Irish famine that left about one million dead and had achieved little in the way of reforming legislation. Where did it all go wrong?

Gray attributes the failure of Russell's Irish policy to the prime minister's lack of mastery over his own cabinet ('Russell was no Gladstone', he says) and to the nature of the divisions within the Whig/Liberal government. The government was divided into three main groups, which Gray categorises as 'Foxite' (of whom Russell himself was the main cabinet representative); 'moderates' (usually large landowners, often with land in Ireland); and 'Moralists' (extreme advocates of free trade and political economy, often with evangelical Christian leanings). No one of these three groups predominated, yet their differences were sufficient to create inertia in attempts to initiate comprehensive schemes of either land reform or famine relief.

Attempts to legislate for increased rights for tenants fell foul of moderate and moralist concerns about state interference with freedom of contract, as did a bill for state-sponsored reclamation of waste lands through compulsory purchase schemes. Attempts to promote free sale of land by breaking up so-called 'encumbered' estates in order to attract new investors initially proved abortive as landlords' concerns led to the watering down of the government's 1848 Encumbered Estates Bill. A strengthened bill passed through parliament the following year, but schemes for government loans to enable tenant purchase of land also failed as a result of concerns about state interference in trade. Even proposals for endowment of the Catholic Church fell foul of the opposition of the Catholic hierarchy, while the extension of the franchise, enacted in 1850, was much watered down from Russell's original plans.

The government's record in dealing with the immediate problem

of food shortage was no better. It is estimated that around one million people died of famine-related causes during the years 1846–50. While Woodham-Smith contrasted the compassionate attitude of the Peel administration with the rigid ideology of Russell's government, Gray is more inclined to stress the continuities of policy. Peel tried to tackle the problem of food shortages in three main ways. First, the government purchased grain to deal with the most severe shortages. Second, the government provided matching funding for money raised by local relief committees. Lastly, it instituted a programme of public works to enable the poor to buy food. Russell's government has been criticised for the speed with which it dismantled these schemes. But Peel had only ever intended these to be temporary measures and there was a belief that the food shortages would prove temporary, as had been the case in other years when the potato crop had failed.

The change of administration enabled the moralist Trevelyan, the permanent under secretary at the Treasury, to exercise more influence over the inexperienced new ministers than he had over Peel's government. Trevelyan and moralist ministers were suspicious of government purchase of food in case it drove up market prices. There was also what Gray describes as a 'fetishisation' of the need to prevent

abuse of relief mechanisms either by those falsely claiming destitution or by landowners trying to evade their own responsibilities by using government funds to improve their estates. Hysteria about 'benefit fraud' is not just a phenomenon of our own era.

However, the Russell administration's famine policy was not without its successes. The replacement of the largely inefficient public works system with direct relief through soup kitchens was largely successful, although fear of abuse led the government to phase them out too quickly. And a public appeal was launched in the spring of 1847, initiated by a letter from Queen Victoria, which raised nearly £435,000 for famine relief from the British public. But sympathy for Ireland's plight evaporated quickly, especially in the wake of the successful potato crop and bumper grain harvest in Ireland in 1847, and the Young Ireland rising in the summer of 1848. Despite the continuing shortages in Ireland, a further appeal later supported by the Queen raised just £20,000. The worsening economic situation in Britain in 1847–48 and the pressure from the large radical grouping in parliament for government retrenchment also militated against generous government action. Gray is clear that the lack of enthusiasm in Britain for generous famine relief measures was not just a matter of the ideology of government ministers, but also of their well-grounded fears that public opinion was hostile to spending money on Ireland.

The government sheltered behind the view that relief should be dealt with locally through the workings of the Irish Poor Law: it was up to the Irish landlords to take responsibility for their own poor. The providentialist ideology of Trevelyan and the cabinet moralists led them to believe that the famine was part of the divine will: a wake up call to the Irish landlord and peasant alike to exert themselves more to modernise their agriculture. Russell, while not sharing their providentialism or rigid economic views, tended to agree with the cabinet moralists about

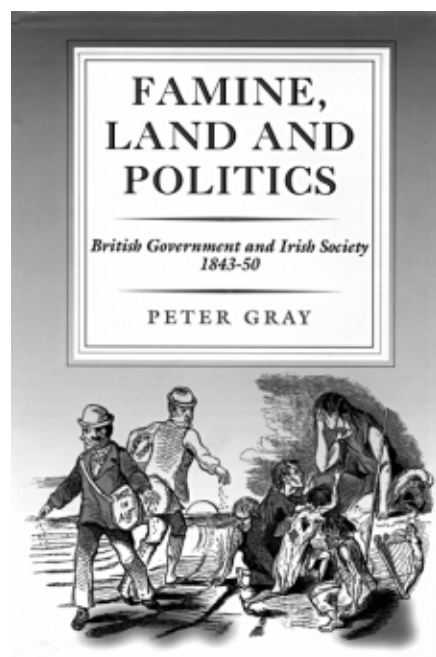
the failings of the landlords. The story of government famine policy in 1848–49 comes across as an almost Kafkaesque tale: a succession of well-meaning proposals from Russell and his Irish Viceroy Clarendon to deal with the catastrophic conditions in Ireland, nearly all of which were stifled by the Treasury and the moralists in the cabinet.

For students of history who are also partisans of the Liberal tradition in British politics, this book makes painful reading. This episode probably represents the greatest failure of nineteenth-century Liberal government in Britain. If the intention of Russell and his Foxite colleagues was to reconcile Catholic Ireland to the union, the impact of government policy was the negation of this: a demonstration that Britain was not prepared to treat Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom, as it should have been under the terms of the union. As the future Irish Home Rule leader Isaac Butt put it:

When calamity falls on us we are... told that we then recover our separate existence as a nation, just so far as to disentitle us to the state assistance which any portion of a nation visited with such a calamity has a right to expect from the governing power.

While it took two more decades for a strong home rule movement to establish itself in Ireland, the legacy of the famine was to create a powerful folk memory of how Britain had failed its obligations under the union and simply abandoned Ireland to its fate.

Gray's excellent book should be required reading not just for students of the Irish famine, but for anyone interested in nineteenth-century Liberal politics. It is not just expertly researched with a clear mastery of sources, but offers a gripping narrative and convincing explanations for British government policy of the period. Although it deals mostly with decision-making at cabinet level it does not fall into the trap of focusing on high politics to the exclusion of the wider political context, including





newspaper comment and public opinion. If I have one criticism it is that having established the inseparability of the issues of land reform and famine relief, Gray proceeds to deal with each of these in separate chapters, which means that the reader can lose

sight of how the two threads interconnect. But that is just a small quibble about a book that really I cannot recommend too highly.

*Iain Sharpe is a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.*

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## Eloquence, energy and execution

David Bebbington & Roger Swift(eds.): *The Gladstone Centenary Essays* (Liverpool University Press, 2000)

Reviewed by Tony Little

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In 1998 a conference was held at Chester College (part of the University of Liverpool), in commemoration of the centenary of Gladstone's death. This collection consists of eleven of the lectures delivered on that occasion, together with a very useful essay by David Bebbington reviewing the historiography of Gladstone. For those of us who attended the event these essays act as a useful reminder of what was said; they elaborate and provide the references for the arguments used. But do they provide a valuable read for those who are not specialists?

In his opening public lecture at the beginning of the conference (unfortunately not included) the late Colin Matthew, the editor of the bulk of the Gladstone Diaries,<sup>1</sup> argued that the diaries were the skeleton on which the body of Gladstone studies would hang. These essays represent a part of that body and try to convey something of the spirit and complexity of the man which no single biography, no matter how well written, can hope to capture. In a review of a biography of Pepys, Christopher Hill argues that the fascination of the Pepys' diary 'is that it does not put before us a single rounded personality but a broken bundle of mirrors. It is genuine because it is utterly inconsistent. Each of us can select his own Pepys'.<sup>2</sup> The issue for students of Gladstone is

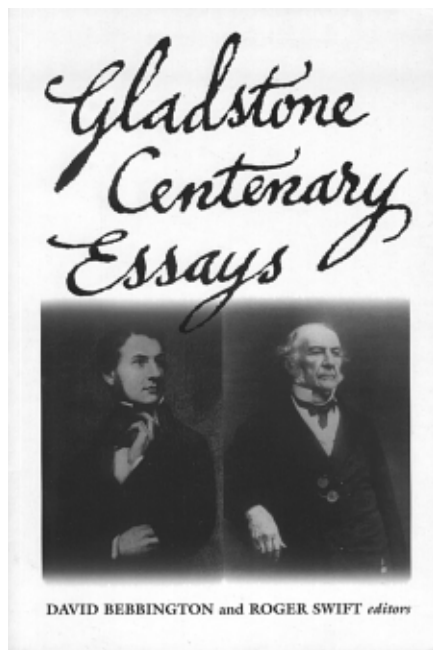
slightly different. His diaries were not primarily an outlet for internal thoughts and discussions of private actions, revealing the fallible man in the way we know and love of Pepys. The examination of conscience, the incidental comments on events and people take second place to a log of correspondence sent and received, people met and books read. It is these bare bones that provide the clues, for those who know how to interpret them. More importantly, as these essays illustrate, Gladstone was not so obviously a mass of contradictions as Pepys. Complex, yes; multi-faceted, yes; but a personality whose wide interests interacted and reinforced each other.

Crucially, Gladstone came to politics by way of religion. Thwarted by his father in his efforts to pursue a career as an ordained minister, he determined to use his skill in politics to fortify the Church. This was simultaneously an enormous strength and a significant weakness. The weakness appeared early, as illustrated in the essays by Stewart Brown on the disruption of the Church of Scotland, and Eric Evans on Gladstone as Peel's pupil. Gladstone's support for High Church Anglicanism never wavered but, with Peel's guidance and by learning from his mistakes, he accommodated himself to the growing diversity of religious opinion in the

country and to the growing significance of the secular business of government. He also managed to learn before he gained a position that was important enough for his early wayward views to have done any damage. The strength his faith brought him was the moral purpose with which he was able to invest all his activities. Like Cromwell, he was doing God's work, though unlike Cromwell, his chosen weapons were eloquence and legislation. Clyde Binfield's essay shows how his moral fervour resonated with the middle class non-conformists who formed the backbone of Liberal support while Eugenio Biagini brings out the theological/philosophical strands that informed the framing of colonial policy in the 1880s.

Gladstone's hobbies of Homer and tree felling are hard to integrate but both are aspects of his immense intellectual and physical energy. It would be inconceivable for Gladstone to restrict himself to admiration of the beauties of Homeric Greek or even to testing his language skills by translation (his Tory rival Derby published an edition of Homer which is to be found in Gladstone's library at Hawarden). As the paper from David Bebbington shows, for Gladstone, Homer was a means of continuing political and religious controversy, an opportunity to argue against the philosophical radicalism of Grote and in defence of divine revelation. The result was the three volume *Homer & the Homeric Age* and later the slightly shorter one volume *Juventus Mundi* in which the Greek gods of mythology are presented as a memory of the divine promise of the coming of God in human form. Bebbington concludes that the growing humanity of Gladstone's Homeric studies reflected the changes in his political beliefs. 'The humanity that transfigured Olympus and the humanity required of British foreign policy were one and the same, a core value of Gladstonian Liberalism'.<sup>3</sup>

The largely political essays, which form the bulk of the collection, focus primarily on the mature statesman, characterised, in Roland Quinault's



phrase, by his 'formidable powers of eloquence, energy and execution'.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, continuity of thought over a sixty year career is strongly in evidence. Gladstone the Oxford Tory opponent of reform in the 1830s is less far removed from the Gladstone of the 'pale of the constitution speech' in the 1860s and of the 1884 Reform Act than might be imagined. The great Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer learnt at the feet of the Conservative Peel as well the Radical Cobden. His first government was Gladstone's most successful, with reforming achievements in education, the electoral system and the army as well as the better known disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, described elsewhere in this issue. But as Jonathan Parry's thoughtful analysis suggests, many of these reforms were achieved by Gladstone's acolytes without much care and attention from the master. His focus was on the church and retrenchment, issues which were even then rather old fashioned and where he was attempting restoration rather than breakthrough.

The theme of Gladstone the conservative reformer is particularly strong in the essays dealing with Ireland. Here again we benefit from the way this collection creates links between the different areas of specialist scholarship. To some contemporaries, Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule was a stunning surprise. Biagini shows

the commonality of Gladstone's approach to the colonies from the 1830s to Egypt and Ireland in the 1880s – a policy of delegation of authority to the local community but within an imperial framework and subject to the appropriate fiscal rectitude that Gladstone expected of all. George Boyce emphasises the influence of Edmund Burke's writings about America and Ireland on Gladstone's thinking about Ulster. Burke began his career as a Whig but the French Revolution turned him into one of the greatest influences on Conservatism. For Gladstone, Home Rule for Ireland was not only the recognition of the will of the Irish people in the 1885 election but also the opportunity to reconnect the Protestant ascendancy of Ireland with its nationality and to provide the upper class with the opportunity to resume their leadership role within the community.

Ireland kept Gladstone on the treadmill of politics well beyond his expected retirement date. It might be argued that his obsession with Ireland did more damage than good to the Liberal party, although this is not a view held by this reviewer. However, a Conservative/Unionist government dominated the twenty years after 1886. Gladstone's final government of 1892 – 94 is analysed by David Brooks. The narrow majority was not propitious to the carrying of Home Rule, though it passed the Commons, and the determination of the Grand Old Man to pass this monument to his career put beyond redemption any lingering hope of re-uniting the Liberal Unionists with the rest of the party. Fittingly, Gladstone's premiership ended with yet another combination of the outmoded with a radical reform. He resigned over a dispute with colleagues on the level of naval defence expenditure, retrenchment again, and on the offer to lead the party into a campaign for reform of the Lords.

Rather surprisingly, in this age of iconoclasm, these essays make no attempt to debunk the Grand Old Man. Rather his reputation survives exposure to the accumulation of

information about his career and thoughts. Nowhere is this truer than over Ireland. Ireland's historians are rather ahead of her politicians in reassessing the myths of the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Alan O'Day elaborates on the arguments he makes elsewhere in this issue about the limited real achievements of Gladstonian Irish policy, to demonstrate that the generosity of his endeavour has been reciprocated in the critique of Irish historians who are far more scathing about their native heroes of the struggle for independence. Only in his own party is the leader without honour: Chris Wrigley shows how in the period after the First World War, Gladstone ceased to be an icon for the party. I would suggest that, even in the neo-liberal revival of the 1980s, the Liberals and the Liberal Democrats have failed to reclaim their legacy, allowing it to be abused by the Right, even though the leaders of the party from Grimond and Steel to Ashdown have been conscious of Gladstone's mantle.<sup>5</sup>

These essays serve as a good introduction to the breadth of material on Gladstone and whet the appetite for yet more knowledge, opening up strands any diligent student would wish to follow. They make no pretence to be a substitute for the biographies by Roy Jenkins, Richard Shannon or Colin Matthews but for readers of any of those who remain curious they are a stimulating read.

*Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

- 1 M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds), *The Gladstone Diaries*, 14 vols. Oxford, 1968 – 94.
- 2 Christopher Hill, *England's Turning Point*, Bookmarks Publications, 1998
- 3 David Bebbington, *Gladstone and Homer*, in D. Bebbington & R. Swift (eds) *Gladstone Centenary Essays*, p. 71.
- 4 Roland Quinault, *Gladstone and Parliamentary Reform*, in D. Bebbington & R. Swift (eds) *Gladstone Centenary Essays*, p. 88
- 5 See Grimond's inaugural speech to the 80 Club in 1980, Steel's 'Go Back To Your Constituencies' speech and Ashdown's final speech in the House of Commons, D. Brack and T. Little (eds) *Great Liberal Speeches*, Politico's, 2001

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# Ireland and the (ab)uses of history

Stephen Howe: *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Reviewed by Michael Steed

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I read this book during the autumn flowering of artificial red poppies, which this year seemed to start even earlier than usual amongst public figures on television. It was as if the sight of young men giving up their lives to the cause of a fundamentalist religion on 11th September had reinforced our leaders' need to conform to the British national myth that the young men brainwashed by patriotism into dying in the trenches had been 'giving their lives for their country'. It put into perspective this account by Stephen Howe of the role of a myth in Irish history, and particularly the use of that myth to legitimise violence in Northern Ireland.

Howe explores the myth that Ireland's problems and especially the Northern Ireland troubles, are a product of British/English colonialism. At least it is clear by the end of the book that he regards it essentially as myth, although as he ploughs through the various authors who take this view, he attempts to deal with them as if they were an academic school and he is maintaining a scholarly, detached stance. Yet, as time and again he exposes the lack of real historical evidence in so many 'anti-colonial' accounts, one senses his mounting frustration. Indeed, to adapt the colonial analogy, Howe is a political scientist mounting a resistance to the imperial attempt by cultural theorists to annex the study of British - Irish relations.

As a fellow political scientist I share Howe's irritation with the way that cultural theorists can get away with imagining their constructs rather than having to grub around documents, facts and figures. As he writes, adapting Peguy, 'In Ireland...it sometimes seems

as if everything begins with politics, becomes mystique and ends as literary theory' (pp 143-44).

The outcome is an academic's book. More than a quarter of it consists of an extensive bibliography and notes. Many of the best and most readable scholarly asides are buried in these often lengthy notes which makes it a pity that the publishers have placed them at the end of the book rather than as classic footnotes. Even more it is largely an account, in university lecturer's hand-out style, for those who wish or need to know the literature on 'Ireland as colony' published in the last three decades or so. To what end?

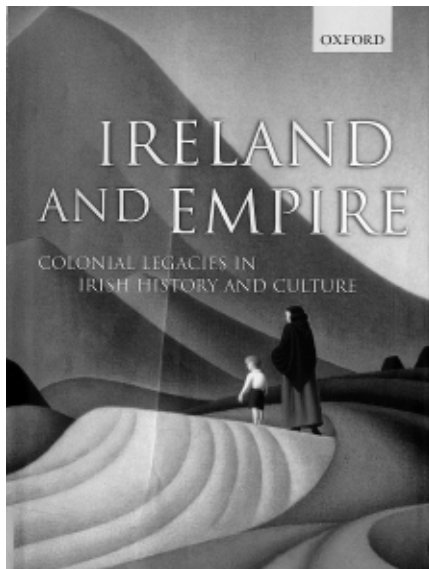
In his Introduction Howe sums up his achievement as 'largely negative judgements about the empirical, theoretical, and political adequacy of colonial and post-colonial frameworks for analysing contemporary Ireland' (I heartily concur) and goes on to claim that he 'attempts to place such analysis in a more appropriate European context' (p 4). Unfortunately he seems to have run out of time, or space, to do the latter properly.

He scatters throughout the book tantalising references to a comparative European perspective (e.g. the pregnant one sentence comparison between Ireland and Bohemia made on p 29). Disappointingly, the relevant penultimate chapter is one of the shortest in the book and reads as a hurriedly compiled list of apparently comparable cases around the world from New Brunswick to Mayotte. If Howe is to carry weight in the academic world this claim badly needs to be placed in an analytical framework. Furthermore, anyone concerned with why apparently religious violence has

persisted in Northern Ireland would benefit from some simplifying model to aid understanding. Otherwise what choice is there other than either the colonial model or the view that somehow people in (Northern) Ireland are peculiar and different?

Howe is not the first to put the colonial model under scrutiny and to find that it fails to fit the facts. Revisionism has been a major growth industry among Irish historians in the last two decades, as they have grappled with a guilty feeling that they might have some responsibility for terrorist violence. The case for such guilt is that allowing romantic nationalism to invent and propagate its version of Ireland's national history, especially in Catholic schools, has sustained recruitment into the IRA and legitimised the armed struggle - historians have a duty to expose such myths. But purely Irish history can only partially explain Ireland's particularity and anyway why should Ireland be peculiarly backward or especially prone to violence? The colonial model has many seductions besides offering a world-wide framework to explain away such puzzles. It suits the modern mood of victimology. It identifies a convenient guilty party and echoes the real experience of so much of the Third World. It is hardly surprising that it appeals as an intellectual belief system which regards scholars such as Howe as nit-picking.

It is a great pity that Howe does not explore the literature on political development and nation building in Europe. This provides an analytical model within which the nature of the competing nationalisms in Northern Ireland makes more sense. However British history, as well as Irish, is mostly told without the benefit of such a perspective. The paucity of a wider understanding of the European-ness of the British Isles' has sustained the 'Irish are peculiar' attitude within Great Britain, and so the appeal of the colonial model. In that sense those British historians who have helped to perpetuate national myths about Britain's glorious history, and its naval/military island story, could also have some responsibility for the historical ideology that has sustained IRA



terrorism, as could those British politicians whose current rhetoric still echoes such myths.

Ireland's history is certainly part and parcel of Europe's history. Unlike Great Britain it escaped the original, direct impact of the Roman empire but so did a large northern zone of the continent. Soon afterwards it became part of Western, Roman Christendom which framed its identity and politico-religious belief system for 1,000 years. During that period it also experienced the European history of movements of peoples, or of elites and dynastic conquest within that common framework. The oddity of mediaeval Irish history is not that a gang of Anglo-Norman robber-barons under Strongbow invaded in 1170, owing feudal allegiance to a culturally French Plantagenet king. It is the way that this incursion, one of the everyday violent adventures of the European Middle Ages, has become mythologised by modern nationalism into uniquely an English colonial act. If a colonial model helps to explain this bit of history then every part of Europe has from time to time been a colony of another part and we are all victims of one another.

Nor when we turn to the crucial sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that are so well remembered in Ireland today was Irish history outside the European mainstream. Like much of the rest of Europe it was rent asunder by the Reformation, or one could say that the British Isles were so rent asunder. The religious atrocities and wars that

followed were no worse in Ireland than in France, Germany or the Netherlands. After 1558 of course England and Wales were treated more mercifully, although the memory of Mary I's rule led to the deep-rooted anti-Catholic sentiments that in turn affected popular British attitudes to Irish Catholics for another couple of centuries. Once again, the peculiarity is why memories of the 1641 Catholic massacre of Protestants or the dark stain of Drogheda on Cromwell's reputation have lasted so much longer and have been so exaggerated by modern nationalists. French, German or Dutch national consciousness had turned its back on similar contemporary events by the early nineteenth century.

By then the whole of Europe had been struck by the political lightning of 1789, from which came the power of the new secular doctrines of nationalism and democracy. France, made in 1689 a purely Catholic kingdom, became a secular republic (where it is easier for a Protestant such as Lionel Jospin to become prime minister and perhaps President than for a British Catholic to become prime minister or monarch). French nationality successfully embraced the German-speaking Alsatians and Catalan-speaking Roussillonais, both of whom had only been annexed to France after Cromwell was dead.

The Germans, who suffered a particularly murderous war for a thirty-year period spanning the 1641 massacre, learned to forget the Catholic/Protestant killings of their war and developed a language-based common identity which failed to incorporate Germans speakers in Switzerland or Alsace. The Dutch created a new political system embracing Catholics despite the fact that the sixteenth century Dutch war of independence had essentially been a Protestant war against the Catholic emperor. In most of Europe the new sense of democratic nationhood was built either on existing state boundaries or, *a la Herder*, on language. So why was it different in Ireland and in Britain?

British nationalism followed, half-heartedly, the French course of seeking to incorporate as part of the polity all

living within the boundaries established by dynasty and conquest. Hence a common parliament was set up for the whole British Isles (except the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands). But George III and the ruling Tories refused to accept the Catholic emancipation that followed logically. Alsatians and Roussillonais were treated as fully French citizens, and came to think of themselves as such, despite history and language. Irish Catholics within the new wider British polity were not, and did not. The circumstances of 1801 did not favour a fresh, secular start in the British Isles.

Furthermore the lightning of 1789 struck Ireland differently. Initially in the 1798 uprising it seemed to spark a modern Irish nationalism that embraced both Catholic and Protestant denominations. But as, in the ensuing three decades, an impressively effective Irish popular movement was built up under the leadership of Daniel O'Connell (a highly innovative political organiser and moderniser), it came fatally to confuse Catholic grievances with the task of creating the new national sentiment. Just as most European nationalisms were discovering a new language-based sense of identity and/or were being endowed with other invented traditions, nascent Irish nationalism was resurrecting the Reformation division of Europe. Meanwhile British nationalism did succeed in incorporating a minority of the inhabitants of Ireland, mainly clustered in the north-east.

In due course Great Britain abandoned the ideal that its Britishness embraced the whole British Isles leaving the bereft Ulster unionists with a confused identity and without a modern terminology in which to express their fears and aspirations. By then Irish nationalism had belatedly added Gladstone to its armoury of symbols but too late to avoid the indelible association with Rome. The result is two completing nationalisms, both identified with religion, one not wanting to be a nationalism and the other not wanting its religious identity.

This is unusual but not unique in Europe. Several other nationalisms have, despite their leaders' wishes,

found their appeal delimited by religious allegiance. Although in most Catholic countries nationalism was essentially secular, Polish nationalism – due to circumstances not dissimilar to those of the Irish – acquired a close identity with Catholicism. Serb nationalism, with its memory of an Islamic oppressor, the Turk, similarly claimed the historically Serb, and Serbo-Croat speaking, Bosnia as Serbian, but saw its local majority, the Bosnian Muslims, rather as Irish nationalists see Ulster Protestants – traitorous allies of the enemy. The partition of Yugoslavia is a more complex story than the partition of Ireland but still remarkably comparable. It is the product of the contingency of nationhood in a part of Europe like Ireland with a much more subtle and uncertain history of nation building than nationalism likes to admit. And wherever in Europe nationalism has become entwined with religious identity it is less understanding of other nationalisms and more prone to violence.

Obviously I find such a framework of political development and of critical junctures in history more useful for analysing European history than the colonial model, but then I am a political scientist with a historical bent. I am not sure where Howe really places himself. In the concluding paragraph of the book he finally lets slip his own very contemporary European social democratic perspective. I discern in him an instinctive dislike of the traditional nationalisms (not just Irish) which have kept violent conflicts going. That might be cheered on by many British Liberal Democrats as well as by most other civilised post-national modern people. However I doubt that this rationalist lack of empathy with the romance of nationalism enables him better to explain or understand its persistence.

Such a framework is much more interesting for the light it throws on British political history, and especially the role of the Liberal party in relationship to Ireland. The colonial model tends to support the superficial view that if Asquith had been more resolute, or Lloyd George less devious, then

Ireland need never have been partitioned. One needs no analytical framework, and only to read a little of Ulster's history, to realise that this view is unsustainable. But could the Gladstonian Liberal solution of a united Ireland within a United Kingdom have worked? I, for one, have sometimes argued that it could, insofar as Ulster Unionism dug its deep populist roots only after 1886. Could a common 'Irish-within-British' identity have grown up around a devolved Irish Parliament?

The comparative European framework however throws some doubt on that optimistic view. It pinpoints the critical juncture as the formative stage of nationhood and suggests that what was happening around 1800 and in the ensuing decades was determinative of later identities. This was a period of repressive Tory misrule throughout the British Isles. The conflict over Catholic emancipation and electoral reform separated profoundly different Whig and Tory views of what the new century's British citizenship was to mean. The longevity of the mad king and other short-term circumstances meant that the more inclusive Whig view only triumphed over Tory obscurantism later, when nationalist identities had become more set. Who can tell whether, if the Whigs had presided over British government in these critical years, a collective, pluralist identity for the unified but in due course decentralised British Isles would have developed?

The choice of analytical framework is also highly relevant to assessment of the current peace process in Northern Ireland. Howe argues that seeking a settlement by recognising two distinct communities or traditions in Northern Ireland offers little hope (pp 237–39). Yet if one acknowledges that both Irish Republican and Ulster Unionist traditions can be seen as victims of the way that their story played out in the aftermath of 1789, then such a bi-communitarian approach to enabling Northern Ireland to move forward in peace makes a lot of sense. It builds on a better understanding of Northern Ireland's history than either the colonial model or Howe's more empirical approach. It also suggests that Northern Ireland could benefit from a more European Union than the British/Irish constitutional framework. That said, it fits my own civic liberalism no better than Howe's social democratic viewpoint or our common humanism.

Whatever one's outlook, however, Stephen Howe has provided an erudite and thorough demolition text on the colonial model that still underpins the thinking of many who seek, unwittingly or not, to prolong the Northern Ireland conflict.

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1 A Celtic term for all of these islands that was widely used well before the creation of the British state, something I learnt from Howe, endnote p. 245

## Forgotten hero

Gordon Gillespie: *Albert H. McElroy: The Radical Minister* (Albert McElroy Memorial Fund, 1985)  
Reviewed by **Bob Bell**

In less than fifty pages Gordon Gillespie manages to provide a full and lively portrait of someone who should be celebrated as one of the great heroes of twentieth century

Liberalism and twentieth century Ireland. The truth is, however, that Albert McElroy is now largely forgotten except by the remaining handful of followers who were touched by his

enthusiasm in the years before the catastrophe of the Troubles. Yet both his religious and political beliefs were prophetic in every sense. He preached doctrines that would not be generally accepted for many decades and, as a result, had to put up with frustrations and abuse that would have deterred a lesser man. In and out of season he preached ecumenical Christianity, an end to sectarianism, political power-sharing, Irish reunification by consent and the uniting of Europe long before such ideas were even contemplated, let alone generally accepted, by most people in Northern Ireland.

His origins lay in that interesting and largely unstudied population that regularly moved between the North of Ireland and Scotland. He was born in Glasgow of Ulster parents and even in his later years he still commuted there to help run a family newsagents. But in his mid-teens the family moved back to Ireland and settled in Toomebridge. He finished his secondary education at Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt and then moved on to Trinity.

At first his political ideas were of a relatively orthodox Labour kind and he was a founder member with Conor Cruise O'Brien of the TCD Fabian Society. At home he joined the NILP and owing to an organisational blunder by the Unionists he suddenly found himself elected unopposed, as a very young councillor, to Magherafelt Rural District Council. But the war interrupted his political career and when he returned from the army he was drawn to the now largely forgotten Commonwealth Labour Party of Harry Midgley and saw great hope in 'Dominion status as a solution to the Irish problem'. But other influences began to move him away from a doctrinaire socialism that he saw as concentrating power in too few hands. In the army he had met many radical politicians from other parts of Europe and a visit to a small profit-sharing engineering works run by a Liberal councillor in Crewe seems to have had a crucial effect on his political development. In Dublin McElroy had also been greatly influenced by Ernest Savill Hicks, minister of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian

church in Stephen's Green, who not only influenced and deepened his religious beliefs but also made him aware of the links between Non-Subscribing Ministers and the United Irishmen during the Rising of 1798. McElroy was hooked. In a move which linked his political and his religious faith he trained as a minister and was appointed to the Non-Subscribing Church in Newtownards where he remained for another twenty years.

In the years that followed he was to preach a message that integrated his religious and his political faith. In particular, he fought sectarianism, using straightforward language that alienated many local Protestants – 'I have always been a Protestant of the Protestants (but) equally I have always regarded the Catholics as our fellow Christians...'

As the 1960s dawned he was optimistic. O'Neill and Lemass had met and there was a real hope that the two communities would draw closer together. The IRA bombing campaign of the late 1950s had done comparatively little damage and failed to ignite a revival of the old hatreds until the person whom McElroy saw as the arch-enemy of Northern Ireland began to stalk the land. He condemned the message of Paisley as 'a prostitution of Protestantism'. For him Paisleyism was no joke. 'It is a gospel of hate... which can only lead to bitterness and violence... This is the one thing that Paisleyism and Sinn Fein have in common but Paisleyism has succeeded where the IRA has failed.' And the subsequent reincarnation of the IRA as the Provisionals he always saw as the work of Paisley.

McElroy joined a small band attempting to revive the Ulster Liberal Association and soon became its leader, being described in a report by a visitor from Liberal Party Headquarters as 'an interesting character, not in the least one's idea of a Presbyterian divine... He has an engaging, jovial uninhibited personality, Rabelaisian in speech and manner...' and so people found him at many a subsequent Liberal Assembly where he rejoiced to mix with young and old, making it his only holiday and recharging his Liberal batteries.

With very meagre resources he set



about organising a party from among any liberal-minded people who expressed an interest, drawing them in by the warmth of his own personality. Soon the party was fighting elections, making it clear that its membership was both Protestant and Catholic. Eventually success came through the PR system that had been retained for electing the Queen's University representatives at Stormont and Sheelagh Murnaghan, McElroy's staunch Catholic lieutenant, was able to make a Liberal presence felt in parliament.

McElroy himself unsuccessfully fought many elections, sometimes getting as many as a third of the votes but always attracting the bitter attacks of the sectarians. In Fermanagh, during the 1950s things had been getting better. Nationalists, Republicans and even leading Unionists such as Lady Brookeborough, the wife of the Prime Minister, had joined together to found a convivial debating society and at the British General Election of 1964, when Evelyn Waugh's son-in-law, Giles FitzHerbert, stood as a Liberal, he faced formidable but not unreasonable opposition. But when Albert McElroy appeared there two years later in a Stormont General Election the violence became considerable. The great enemy of Paisley had to be defended by fifty policemen as a mob of over a hundred stormed the platform in Enniskillen Town Hall.

But nothing daunted he unsuccessfully attempted to establish a branch of the party in the Republic and personally fought another election in Fermanagh. Anti-sectarianism was now

commonly seen as a form of extremism. Yet he unashamedly conducted a service over the grave of Henry Joy McCracken and traditional unionists did not invite him to the Remembrance Day ceremonies in Newtownards even though he was the only ex-serviceman among the ministers of the town.

As the Troubles grew worse, McElroy's task became immensely harder and it began to tell on his health. Yet there can be no doubt that some of the constitutional proposals that he and his Liberal colleagues submitted were to influence the Heath government's plans for what eventually became the ill-fated Sunningdale Agreement.

The failure of the first power-sharing assembly had a very negative effect. Gradually the Ulster Liberal Association began to disintegrate. Some members, as Denis Loretto describes elsewhere in this issue,

became founding members of the SDLP. Others formed the nucleus of the Alliance Party. Yet Albert, like Sheelagh Murnaghan, never thought of joining them and there is no doubt that before his death at the early age of sixty in 1975, he was saddened by the London party's embracing of Alliance as the province's true Liberals. He saw the weakness of Alliance in what he said was its glib assumption that the majority of Northern Ireland people were moderates, and argued with great foresight that only 15 per cent of Ulster people would ever vote for a party that deliberately set out to be 'moderates'. For him Alliance members were not Liberals but 'decent Tories' who would be more use in the Unionist Party. At the same time, he said, 'civilised Tories (were) to be preferred to Tory Rednecks' among whom, no doubt, he included all those who supported Paisley. Certainly McElroy,

though always full of Christian charity, was never a moderate. He was always willing to tackle the ultra-Protestants who had given the IRA their chance and were determined to oppose all civilised measures of reform.

But he remained to the end a colourful figure, the same old Albert who had sipped a small mouthful of champagne at Sheelagh Murnaghan's victory party but had then insisted on buying fish and chips all round as his own contribution to the celebrations. No wonder figures as wide-ranging as Cardinal Conway and the maverick Unionist MP Jim Kilfedder were to send tributes to the funeral of this humane and liberal man

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## Gladstone and Ireland: The Legacy (continued from page 15)

ties of Ireland's Catholics, it addressed the far greater need to make the Union a reality, to show the peoples of the nation that they could successfully seek remedies from Parliament, and that the modern British state was able to incorporate differing religions, ethnicities and personal aspirations. It was fundamentally the same message Gladstone introduced more generally into Liberalism. His opponents were less confident that the nation could or even ought to make the leap to inclusiveness.

The Land Act [1870] likewise was something bigger in design than simply giving Irish tenants improved legal status. It did not have the practical outcome anticipated, especially by Irish tenant interest, but the measure, as Gladstone intended, increased the sense that all members of the community held rights and privileges, and so that ownership of wealth also carried responsibility.

Again in 1881 Gladstone approached the Irish land question not from a socially radical point of view, but saw legislation as the means to restore the interconnection between members of the community, a link that appeared to him to have been damaged. By releasing

Fenian prisoners Gladstone displayed mercy but more significantly, he sought to establish the principle that the state was sufficiently strong to be able to weather the torrent of discontent manifested in the Fenian movement, and come out the other end of the tunnel stronger than before. A strong commitment was also a just one.

Finally, Gladstone tried to resolve the thorny question of higher education for the rising Catholic middle classes. As always he had to work within political parameters but again he upheld a principle that in a modern society access to education should be extended more fully to groups previously on the margins.

His later governments amplified and extended the principles of the first years but they always owed a debt to this initial phase of Gladstone's Irish interest. But above all, it is the legacy of Gladstone's spirit that has continued to animate centre-left thinking in Britain on Irish affairs.

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*researching the Irish National Party, nationalism and the dilemma of political representation between 1874 and 1921.*

- 1 I owe this reference to Dr Clare Hutton, Institute of English Studies, University of London, who has edited Fahy's memoir.
- 2 Quoted in E. D. Steele, 'Gladstone and Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, XVII, March, 1970, p. 58.
- 3 H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 192.
- 4 Quoted in John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*. London, Macmillan, 1903, Vol. III, p. 292.
- 5 Lewis Harcourt's Journal, 8 March 1886, Harcourt Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS 377.
- 6 Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867–1921*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 294–304.
- 7 Quoted in A.B. Cooke and A.P.W. Malcolmson (compl.), *The Ashbourne Papers, 1869–1918*. Belfast, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 1974, p. 174.
- 8 Quoted in H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 266.
- 9 Quoted in Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, III, p. 437.
- 10 *Parliamentary Debates*, Fourth Series, 7, 1892, cc. 210–14.
- 11 Henry W. Lucy, *A Diary of the Home Rule Parliament 1892–1895*. London, Cassell, 1896, p. 55.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 13 Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, p. 172.
- 14 D. George Boyce, *The Irish Question and British Politics 1869–1986*. London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989, p. 62.
- 15 F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890–1939*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 135.

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