
A Liberal partition

Thomas Hennessey: *Dividing Ireland: World War I and Partition* (Routledge, 1998; 280pp)

Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

In the summer of 1914, before the outbreak of the First World War, the Irish parliamentary party and their Liberal allies constituted a majority in Parliament, and stood at last on the verge of achieving their long-standing aim of bringing about Irish Home Rule. By the end of the war both parties had seen their political power and influence destroyed, and the Home Rule cause that united them discredited and superseded.

Thomas Hennessey's book describes the widening divisions within Ireland that undermined Home Rule and brought about the triumph of the separatist strand of Irish nationalism. In a sense the subtitle of the book serves to obscure rather than clarify its subject matter, since Hennessey primarily deals with the widening divisions between the Ulster Unionist and Irish Nationalist communities rather than with the process of partition itself.

On the outbreak of war, the Irish Nationalist leader, John Redmond, sought to demonstrate the loyalty of Ireland to the British Empire by making the nationalist Irish Volunteer force available for home defence. He hoped to win over both Irish and British unionists to acceptance of Home Rule. However, in committing Ireland to supporting the British cause, he alienated the more advanced nationalists, who felt no loyalty to their traditional, English, enemy. Redmond's gesture equally failed to placate the Ulster Unionists who were unhappy at the way the Home Rule bill was placed on the statute book (albeit suspended for the duration of the war) without any amending bill to make special provision for Ulster.

Redmond was asking Irish Nationalists to put on hold the nationalist

view of Britain as the historic oppressor and instead to accept the justness of Britain's cause in the war. In 1914 this could be justified on the grounds that the British Parliament had legislated for Home Rule and that the Liberals, the traditional allies of the Irish parliamentary party, were in government. However, key events during the war pulled Liberals and Irish Nationalists in different directions, as each had different audiences to please. When the Liberals brought the Conservatives into government in 1915, to Irish Nationalists this felt like a betrayal of their cause, the more so as the Ulster Unionist leader Carson was now a member of the cabinet. At the same time Redmond was unable to accept a seat in the cabinet for fear of appearing to sell out to British imperialism.

Redmond's position was further undermined in early 1916, when nationalist Ireland became increasingly alarmed at the prospect of the introduction of conscription. He hesitated about campaigning against it for fear of undermining Asquith, since any alternative government seemed likely to be less sympathetic to Home Rule. But to many nationalists it seemed that he was paying too much attention to British opinion rather than fighting for Ireland's interests, and this led to further loss of confidence in the Irish party.

The brutal response of the British government to the 1916 Easter Rising, the revelation in the ensuing talks about Home Rule that Lloyd George had guaranteed to Carson the permanent exclusion of the six north-eastern counties, together with the 1918 conscription crisis, eroded and destroyed the power of the Irish parliamentary party for good. At the same time, the equivocal nature of the Irish Nationalist support for the British

cause and the contrast between the apparent treachery of the Easter Rising and the sacrifice of Ulster regiments at the Somme in the same year reinforced Ulster Unionists' sense of attachment to Britain and their separation from nationalist Ireland.

In his conclusion, Thomas Hennessey argues that while Ireland might have been partitioned even without the intervention of the First World War, the war 'led to a form of psychological partition that could not have been predicted before the war'. He points out that the form of Home Rule envisaged in 1914 was devolved government within the framework of the United Kingdom, and speculates that this would have made the moves towards separation made by the southern Irish government between 1922 and 1948 much more difficult. In doing this he hints that but for the First World War, partition might not have been permanent, and a united Ireland could ultimately have remained within the orbit of the British Commonwealth, if not the United Kingdom.

I am not so sure about this. It seems to me that the Irish parliamentary party always depended on ambiguity about the ultimate objective of Irish nationalism, in order to keep republicans and moderate Home Rulers under its broad umbrella. But the lack of empathy with British imperial causes displayed by even the Irish parliamentary party during its period of political hegemony in Ireland suggests that in different circumstances progress toward independence might have been slower, but it would have happened sooner or later. Equally, while the Ulster Unionists' perception of what they saw as nationalist treachery might have strengthened their British rather than Ulster loyalty, they had made it plain over nearly three decades that they did not want to be part of a united, Home Rule, Ireland. Their attitudes were surely reinforced, but not fundamentally changed, by the course of Irish politics during the First World War.

What Thomas Hennessey has written, therefore, is a book that very clearly outlines the way the First World

War highlighted the depths of the divisions within Ireland. Readers whose primary interest is Liberal history may find it rather too much focused on the Irish rather than the British aspects of the issues under discussion. But since the book chronicles the ultimate failure

of Home Rule – a great cause of Liberal governments – it should still be of interest.

Iain Sharpe is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group and a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford.

The Library knows Lloyd George

J. Graham Jones: *Lloyd George Papers at the National Library of Wales and Other Repositories* (National Library of Wales, 2001; 95pp)

Reviewed by Duncan Brack

Readers of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* have been forewarned of the publication of this excellent booklet; it was mentioned in the guide to Liberal archives at the National Library of Wales written by its author, J. Graham Jones (assistant archivist), in issue 26 of the *Journal* (spring 2000). But the booklet is much more than a dry listing and numbering of archives: it includes a series of fascinating quotes from the sources themselves, a short chronology of David Lloyd George's career, a comprehensive bibliography of biographies and other monographs, some pictures and cartoons from the Library's collection, and a brief guide to Lloyd George-related material held in other archives.

The most important group of Lloyd George's political papers are held by the Parliamentary Archive at the House of Lords, but the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales holds no fewer than seven significant groups of papers, six of them acquired in the last two decades. In this it is fulfilling the prophecy of Sir John Herbert Lewis, Liberal MP for Flintshire, in 1910. Writing to thank Lloyd George for his grant, in his capacity of Chancellor of the Exchequer, to the newly established National Library, Lewis had expressed his belief that 'the Library will be, at, I hope, a very distant date your literary mauso-

leum'. As Jones puts it, 'to a large extent, this hope has by now been fulfilled', and he is confident that no major Lloyd George archive now remains in private hands.

Lloyd George was not a particularly prolific correspondent, but he did write regularly to his first wife Margaret, and to his younger brother William, and the latter group of letters are especially interesting for their political observations. The other groups of papers derive from three of Lloyd George's children – Richard (the eldest son), Olwen (the second daughter) and Gwilym (the second son, later Viscount Tenby) – from Lloyd George's principal private secretary A. J. Sylvester, and from his confidante, mistress and second wife Frances Stevenson. The booklet describes the contents and origins of each of these seven groups of papers, and provides quotes illustrating key points in his political career and personal relationships.

His affection for his first wife Margaret is very obvious, but so too are the strains in their marriage. Trying to persuade her to join him in London, for example, he implored her in 1896 to 'drop that infernal Methodism which is the curse of your better nature and reflect whether you have not rather neglected your husband. I have more than once gone without breakfast. I

have scores of times come home in the dead of night to a cold, dark and comfortless flat without a soul to greet me.' But six years earlier she had written to him, warning him bluntly that: 'I am glad you have not seen anyone to flirt with. Remember to be careful in that line, or I will soon find out.' The profound differences in their characters are well illustrated by a letter Lloyd George wrote to his brother William in December 1907, shortly after the tragic death of his first daughter, Mair Eluned. He had resolved to go to the continent while Margaret remained at home. 'M. would rather go to Criccieth, otherwise she might very well come. But, as she puts it, she likes quiet & hates meeting people. On the other hand solitude or even quietness would kill me.'

For readers of the *Journal* it is the letters tracking the course of Lloyd George's political career, and his observations on political events and personalities, that will probably prove most interesting. In 1904 he wrote to Margaret, after a long conversation with Sir Edward Grey, that: 'We had a very frank chat about the prospective Liberal ministry – if it comes off. He says I am certain to have a seat in the Cabinet. Told him I must bargain for Wales.' In 1912, writing to William about the party's reaction to his land campaign, he observed that: 'Winston [Churchill] alone being doubtful – but he has become very reactionary of late. However Winston is not going to give

