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Irish Home Rule

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

By the spring of 1914, the question of Irish home Rule had been completely transformed into a question of the coercion of Ulster. The traditional bulwarks of resistance to Home Rule had been effectively removed by the emasculation of the House of Lords, following their rejection of the "People's Budget" of 1909, and by John Redmond's successful resurrection of the Irish Parliamentary Party from the ashes of self immolation following Parnell's meteoric downfall. Protestant Ulster, with the apparent hour of "Rome rule" drawing nearer, abandoned the advice of moderates and logicians and began to take up arms against the crown in order to maintain it. Were it not for a wrong turn by the Archduke Franz Ferdinand's driver in Sarajevo, Englishmen would likely have found themselves talked into a Civil War by a loud minority of Irishmen.
Irish Home Rule
by Galen Lewis

By the spring of 1914, the question of Irish Home Rule had been completely transformed into a question of the coercion of Ulster. The traditional bulwarks of resistance to Home Rule had been effectively removed by the emasculation of the House of Lords, following their rejection of the “People’s Budget” of 1909, and by John Redmond’s successful resurrection of the Irish Parliamentary Party from the ashes of self immolation following Parnell’s meteoric downfall. Protestant Ulster, with the apparent hour of “Rome rule” drawing nearer, abandoned the advice of moderates and logicians and began to take up arms against the crown in order to maintain it. Were it not for a wrong turn by the Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s driver in Sarajevo, Englishman would likely have found themselves talked into a Civil War by a loud minority of Irishmen.

The situation as it stood in 1914 does beg a very significant question, that being why hadn’t such bellicose resistance arisen from Ulster during the two previous Home Rule debates? And furthermore, why hadn’t the previous two bills been transformed to revolve around Ulster, and not Ireland as a whole, as the last was destined to? The answer is not completely clear, as it seems that perhaps the same resistance did in fact arise, the difference lying in the two years the bill (introduced in April of 1912) was allowed to fester, the Ulstermen to sabre-rattle, and Asquith’s cabinet hinting of coercion.

How different was Ulster that it dreaded Home Rule to such an extent? The three provinces of Munster, Leinster, and Connacht were, for the most part, rural, poor and overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Ulster boasted nearly the reverse. Out of a total population of 1,147,000, roughly 8 out of 10 were Protestants of various denominations (890,108) (Buckland 16). The city of Belfast, holding a huge but proportional sway over the province, was a tremendous source of pride and wealth to the Protestant ascendancy and the only city in Ireland to bear the brunt of the Industrial Revolution. The resultant self-identity, strong, confident and British, was to be a huge force in the Home Rule debates.

One prominent Unionist attributed Ulster’s success to the fact that she had “turned her back on rainbow chasing, and has perseveringly trodden the hard, rough, path of constant attention to work, low living and strenuous effort, with the careful husbanding of the money that was the reward” (Buckland 30). This melancholy Protestant ethos was believed to be unintelligible to the province’s Catholic minority who were thought suited for little more than soldiery or servitude, and then only assuming that they had stern discipline looming menacingly over them. Protestants acted, for the most part, courteous and civil toward their Catholic neighbors, but were horrified at the thought of them acting in numbers, either physically or politically. Like their notions of superiority, Protestant fears were rooted in history. The Orange Order drank to “The glorious, pious and immortal memory of the great and good King William, who saved us from popery, slavery, knavery, brass money and wooden shoes”\(^1\) and the Revolt of 1641 was cited as further proof of Catholic treachery. Society was indeed fractured (Buckland 22).

\(^1\) The references of wooden shoes being to the French, although this is quite ironic in that we now tend to associate wooden shoes with the state of William’s birth, Holland.
Prosperity in Ulster generally, and Belfast specifically, was seen solely as a result of the Act of Union. In the words of a Belfast delegation meeting with Gladstone in 1893:

All our progress has been made under the union. We were a small, insignificant town at the end of the last century, deeply disaffected and hostile to the British Empire. Since the Union and under equal laws, we have been wedded to the Empire and made progress second to none (Buckland 30).

It was common for Ulstermen to point to the Act of Union as a simple answer for what was, in reality, the complex result of a series of mostly global economic factors. The real reasons for Protestant Ulster’s affection for Union and resistance to Home Rule were probably more in line with the opinion of a Derry doctor, who believed that Ulster was “prosperous, content and happy, and why she should be afraid to take a blind leap into the dark is easy to understand” (Buckland 30).

The “dark” was rule by a Dublin, and overwhelmingly Catholic, parliament. There were two main thrusts to arguments of resistance to Home Rule, the evils of Popery and the evils of southern economics. Many Protestants at the turn of the last century, and not just in Ulster, believed that the Pope was intent on once again wielding power over the entire globe. This 17th century mindset fostered a legitimate fear of the Papacy. Jonathon Bardon writes that “Catholicism was regarded as an oppressive and backward religion and the fear that Home Rule would result in Rome rule was genuine” (Bardon 407). It seemed to occur to few that the Irish parliament would act independently of Rome as did the governments of nearly every other modern Catholic nation at the time, for even Spain, birthplace of the inquisition, found itself able to govern without the aid of His Holiness. As if the dark shadow of Rome in general wasn’t frightening enough to a large segment of the community, most assumed that the church would sink its claws into the young under a mandatory apparatus of Catholic education, or worse yet, Protestants would be excluded from government resulting in their being reduced to “hewers of wood and drawers of water for their Catholic masters” (Buckland 32). Certain contemporary events did not help Irish Catholics to shake this image, namely church involvement in Parnell’s spectacular fall and the ill-timed Ne Tempere decree of 1908; however, Protestant fears of Rome were, in hindsight, obviously a vestigial legacy of a bygone era (Buckland 30-32).

The second line of resistance followed economic reasoning based on a shaky foundation of Protestant superiority. The province’s leading businessmen, Protestant nearly as a rule, believed that a parliament primarily hailing from a rural environment would be incapable of understanding Ulster’s economy, global and urban. Many feared the erection of huge protective tariffs in an attempt at self-sufficiency coupled with some backhanded Tammany Hall style of government that would see them all ruined. These fears resulted in an economic panic in Belfast when Gladstone’s first Home Rule bill was announced in 1886 and is further evidenced by Lord Pirrie’s decision to move the whole of Harland & Wolff’s operations to the Clyde in the event that Home Rule passed (Bardon 404).

As Protestant Ulster stewed in sectarian fear, the Irish mandate for Home rule grew, and grew quickly. Charles Parnell’s Land League apparatus had been turned into a powerful force at Westminster and by 1885 nearly 80% of the country supported Home Rule. The Irish mandate found a receptive ear in William Gladstone.

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The “Grand Old Man” of British politics, Gladstone picked up the standard of Irish Home Rule towards the end of the election campaign of 1885, drawing criticism and accusations of ill motive from all-sides. His motives were, and are, heavily debated. He likely felt that Britain owed a debt to the people of Ireland and that certainly fits in with his actions regarding the Balkans, where he championed nationalism and an anti-imperialist mindset. It is also likely that the balance of power in parliament, held by the Irish Nationalists, figured prominently into his decision, as did the chance to finally remove the problems of governing Ireland from the halls of Westminster. Regardless of his reasons, the result was an angry Ulster and the staunch opposition of the Conservative Party, strengthened by many defectors from Gladstone’s own benches.

When introducing the Home Rule Bill on April 8, 1886, Gladstone stated that he could not “allow it to be said that a Protestant minority in Ulster, or elsewhere, is to rule the question at large for Ireland...but I think that the Protestant minority should have its wished considered to the utmost practicable extent in any form they may assume” (Stewart 21). That would not be good enough for Ulster, the question was, would she find a collective and representative voice to say so.

The Ulster of 1885 was seriously split along party lines, resulting in many Nationalist gains in the general election. Liberal and Conservative Unionists contested seats that went to Parnellites on Election Day. With Home Rule at the fore of British politics following Gladstone’s election, it was realized by many that it could never be successfully resisted by anything but a solid Protestant political bloc, arranged not along traditional party lines, but by a desire to preserve the Union. From the outset, these measures bore a distinctively regional, that is to say mainly limited to Ulster, appearance. The Ulster Loyalist Anti-Repeal Union (ULARU), predominantly Conservative, also drew in the Orange Order, revived by Colonel Edward Saunderson in 1883, and quickly became the most vocal cross-party body, the Order having proven incapable of uniting Unionists on its own as a result of its violent rhetoric and penchant for hurling paving stones.

The Anti-Repeal Union focused its efforts on lobbying Westminster and consolidating Unionist power in Ulster, but also devoted a fairly large portion of its time to spouting alarming rhetoric and extra-political organization. At a 20,000-man rally on April 26, 1886 it was declared that if Home Rule was granted, “We shall not acknowledge that government; that we...will refuse to pay taxes imposed by it; and...that we will resist to the utmost all attempts to enforce such payments” (Buckland 2). The ULARU found its most vocal and powerful supporter in Lord Randolph Churchill, then at the height of his power and considered an eventual Conservative Prime Minister. Churchill, having early on decided “that if the G.O.M. went for Home Rule, the Orange Card would be the one to play” and praying that it turned out to be “the ace of trumps and not the two” accepted an invitation from the ULARU to speak at Belfast’s Ulster Hall in February of 1886 (Buckland 9). After warning the province to prepare so that Home Rule would not come upon them “like a thief in the night,” his words became a harbinger of a future crisis: “I do not hesitate to say...in that dark hour there will not be wanting to you those of position and influence in England who are willing to cast in their lot with you, whatever it may be, and who will share your fortune and fate” (Stewart 22). Churchill went on to say in a public letter a few days later:
If political parties and political leaders should be so utterly lost to every feeling and dictate of honour and courage to hand over coldly...the lives and liberties of the loyalists of Ulster to their hereditary and most bitter foes, make no doubt on this point; Ulster at the proper moment will resort to the supreme arbitrate of force; Ulster will fight, and Ulster will be right (Stewart 23).

The saying was to long outlive Lord Randolph Churchill; people are still dying for it in Northern Ireland today. The speech was to put in the nation's mind the spectre of armed Ulster resistance, a spectre whose features would become clearer with each passing year.

The method by which Ulster planned to resist “the thief in the night” was a 60,000 man volunteer force, formed into two full army corps by the end of May. Just as was to be the case in 1912-1914, prominent army officers had pledged their support and the Fourth Sea Lord had stated that he would resign from the Admiralty before he would enforce Home Rule. Non-commissioned officers were solicited to begin drilling the King’s men (Buckland 12). Before the division on the first Home Rule bill, the MP for West Belfast stated that “there can be no doubt that the Loyalists are arming,” and it seems that the movement was not limited to the sections of society that historically had a certain appreciation for anything involving guns, loud explosions, and dead people (Bardon 382). Quite on the contrary, “The word ‘Resist! Resist!’ was on the lips not merely of Orangemen, but of Liberals, of those who by their profession were men of peace, merchants, manufacturers, bankers, medical men, and even clergymen” (Bardon 383). Just like the Crisis surrounding the third Home Rule bill, a huge cross section of society was at least tacitly in support of armed resistance. The vital difference separating the two was time. The division for the First Home Rule Bill occurred on June 8, 1886, the debate had been in the foreground a mere two months. By the time the Great War intervened in 1914 Home rule had occupied the politicians, and the nation, for nearly two and a half years.

Despite an eloquent and providential plea by Gladstone, in which he exhorted Parliament to “think well, think wisely, think not for the moment but for the years which are to come, before you reject this bill” (Stewart 23), the First Home Rule Bill was defeated by thirty votes, 93 Liberals having voted against their own leader. The Conservative Party rejoiced as did the rioting loyalists of Belfast, who had been read the Riot Act four days previous after having run every Catholic out of the Lagan shipyards and continued on in sectarian fervor to burn their homes. The city was in a state of anarchy with mob violence erupting in every section of the city where Catholics and Protestants found one another in proximity. The riots continued for four more days before they were suppressed, only to erupt anew a month later (Bardon 380-2). It must have seemed unlikely to many on the English side of the Irish Sea that such people were even worthy of self-government.

Ulster Unionism did not immediately subside following the defeat of Home Rule as many assumed it would. The autumn election of 1886 saw a Unionist candidate retake the Derry seat lost to the Nationalists a year prior; the balance of Ulster was once again Unionist, 17 seats to the Nationalist’s 16. Unionist clubs were functioning well at the grassroots, constituency level despite the loose ties that bound them to the central Unionist Club Council. Under the auspices of these clubs, Unionists did not oppose one another, ending the fratricidal sapping of strength that had plagued them in prior contests. By 1890 the Grand Old Man had
entered his eightieth decade, hardly the image of man with fight left in him. The Irish Parliamentary Party had nearly self-destructed following Parnell’s public fall. The Nationalists that sat in Westminster were hardly an inspiration for Home Rule. It might have seemed likely that the Irish storm had passed (Bardon 408).

The election of 1892 proved that the storm had merely blown out to sea for six years. Gladstone once again sat on the Treasury Bench and was once again dependent on the Nationalist vote, albeit now fractured between anti-Parnellites and adherents of the dead man. Once again the Unionist apparatus sprung into action at all levels, with the central Club Council taking on an ever more important role in the mold of the ULARU in 1886.

In June, 1892, resistance was centered on Belfast, the site of an immense Unionist rally. Under the largest tent in Ireland the sons of Ulster spoke to their resolve surrounded by miles of bunting and hundreds of Union Jacks. After the keynote speaker, the Duke of Albercon, appealed to the “men of the north” to resist, Liberal MP Thomas Sinclair raised more applause by stating:

Fellow countrymen, Mr. Gladstone’s threat is a serious one, but, nevertheless, we can never falter in our resolve. We are the children of the Revolution of 1688, and, cost what it may, we will have nothing to do with a Dublin parliament. If it be ever set up we shall simply ignore its existence. Its acts will be but waste paper; the police will find our barracks pre-occupied with our own constabulary; its judges will sit in empty court-houses (Buckland 16).

Sinclair’s tone was more restrained than that of his colleagues in Britain. At the annual meeting of the Primrose League, the recently evicted Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, delivered a benediction of Unionist action. He spoke to the effect that in the past Ulster had resisted the unconstitutional actions of James II and today could be counted on to resist the unconstitutional actions of a treacherous parliament, for he did not think that “the people of Ulster had lost their sturdy love of freedom nor their detestation of arbitrary power” (Buckland 15). Arthur Balfour spoke more menacingly: “Ulster can at all events fight; the last refuge of brave men struggling for their freedom cannot be denied them” (Buckland 18).

As in 1886 talk of resistance was not merely limited to words. In March of 1893 the Ulster Defence Council was formed under the auspices of the Unionist Club Council; its executive consisted of the province’s parliamentarians. Once again old soldiers were lined up to take charge of the group and feelers were put out to foreign arms manufacturers. Once again preparations were made for Ulster’s armed resistance to Home rule, and once again time would keep the spectre at bay.

Vocal support for Home Rule was much harder to come by, apart from that which sprang from the mouth from Gladstone himself. His passion was not shared by many of his fellow Liberals and the efforts of Nationalists were still hamstrung by their very public schism. Despite the inauspicious omens, sheer numbers carried Home Rule across the floor of the Commons in the summer of 1893; no other 19th Century bill had occupied as much of the House’s time (Bardon 41). The measure, however, would find a far less receptive audience in the staunchly Conservative House of Lords.

The bill was defeated by the Lords on September 9, 1893 by 378 votes. Only two members were absent without legitimate excuse and even the infirm had been
Bardon cites the fact that no constitutional crisis resulted from a plain challenge to the representatives of the people, as ample evidence that the bill had little support among Britons in general. In fact, it seemed most were glad to see the Irish question disappear and a return to the normal party squabbles, familiar to all and threatening to few. The exceptions were quite obviously Gladstone, who handed Queen Victoria his resignation, and the Nationalists, who couldn’t muster the strength to yell over one another to coherently argue the fact (Bardon 413).

More so even than in 1886, Home Rule seemed utterly vanquished. When writing of his father’s career in 1904, Winston Churchill described reading the parliamentary debates of the subject was like walking over a long deserted battlefield, the issues, and even the armies, having been obscured by time. Churchill need only to have looked to Ulster to clear his vision. The Unionist movement did not disappear with the “cold storage” of Home Rule. It had little reason to: “The impressive commercial and industrial strength of Ulster, especially in and around Belfast, as the Victorian Age was succeeded by the Edwardian, provided Unionists with formidable powers of resistance when Home Rule once more became the central issue at Westminster” (Bardon 384).

Ulster’s Unionists would not have needed to be reminded of this by Mr. Bardon. They were well aware of the power of their position after successfully contesting Home Rule twice, and were determined not to drop their guard, even after Home Rule had been long eclipsed by the Boer War, free trade, and constitutional reform.

The Conservative policy of killing Home Rule with kindness was met with little support from Ulster’s Unionist community. Partly a result of institutional distrust of Catholics and equally a product of Ulster’s status as the last bastion of Protestant landlordism, growing apprehension was evident in Unionist ranks. Irish policy once again was spurred by Ireland’s most vocal minority after the MacDonnell affair was “discovered” by the press. Lord MacDonnell was the Catholic Undersecretary of State for Ireland. His leanings were avowedly nationalistic and he was a member of the Irish Reform Association, a group dedicated to the achievement of Home Rule in Ireland. In September 1904, the Reform Association published a scheme to form an Irish national council that would have some powers of devolutionary government. MacDonnell publicly endorsed the scheme without the approval of the Conservative government or his immediate superior, George Wyndham. A deafening uproar was emitted by Ulster’s Unionists, who cited the plan as a half-baked and backhanded attempt to grant Ireland Home Rule on the sly. Unionism was seldom held back by logic and this time would be no exception. They were only placated by the removal of Wyndham, the man responsible for the final eradication of the Irish land problem by his Land Act of 1903. Apart from reminding the Westminster that they still held sway over many powerful men, Ulster reminded itself of the threat, in any form, of Home Rule.

The controversy spurred a reform of the club council system into a more efficient and centralized body. The Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) was formed in March 1905 and from its inception was the model for the gathering of Unionist support. It incorporated a fixed number of representatives of the Orange Order, officials of every grassroots county club, as well as all of Ulster’s Unionist MP’s and Lords. By 1910 a secret committee of the UUC was meeting to determine its plans to import arms and a Major Fred Crawford,
who had founded Young Ulster in 1892, was formally charged with that duty (Bardon 431).

It is Bardon’s belief that “Despite occasional dark threats of popular resistance, since 1886 the Ulster Unionists had put their faith in parliamentary action. Now—still uncertain of the Tory resolve at Westminster and disgusted by the apparent indifference of the British electorate—Northern Loyalist leaders firmly embarked on an unconstitutional course” (Bardon 431). By this reasoning Home Rule would not acquire a real and dangerous Ulster dimension until the introduction of the Third Bill in April, 1912. But did not the Loyalist leaders pursue both courses every step of the way, abandoning their rifles only when the battle had been safely won in Parliament? It seems certain that segments of Ulster society would have resisted violently to the imposition of Home Rule. An Orangeman represented by a Catholic parliament is a hard sell today, and would have been ludicrous a century ago. It seems likely that the resistance would grow among all members of Protestant society as that parliament, in conjunction with the British government, attempted to impose itself on a province that in Thomas Sinclair’s words “simply ignores its existence.” The difference between resistance to the Third Bill and those previous lay not in an absence of an Ulster dimension before 1912, as that is what drove the defeat of Home Rule far more than “the preservation of the empire” or any other argument against a quasi-independent Ireland, but in the fact that Home Rule was certain to pass by 1914. The Ulstermen felt forced to throw down their pens and pick up their rifles, as they would have done, and prepared to do, both in 1886 and 1893.

Works Cited


