

IRELAND 1800-1921

An Overview

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1. Nationalism *versus* Localism

There is a tendency to see nineteenth century Ireland largely, if not solely, in terms of the rise of Irish nationalism and of the nationalisation of Irish politics. There is no doubt that the rise of a national movement and a conflict between nationalism and unionism is a vital ingredient of nineteenth century Irish history, but, equally, it is wrong to see Irish politics only in terms of big, national issues. Localism, even parochialism, was an equally marked feature of Irish political life, even in times of national ferment. Ireland may be a small country, but it is a very diverse one.

Diversity of identity

Politically, the political history of Ireland under the Union may be divided into two broad periods, the turning point being around the year 1870. Despite historic and other grievances, by the 1860s Ireland seemed to have settled down under direct British rule, as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Irish people defined themselves in different ways - in terms of religion, class, kinship, place and sometimes nationality. Generally, the relationship with Britain was not a question of overriding importance.

In 1800, following the United Irish Rebellion in 1798, the Act of Union abolished the Irish parliament that had existed in one form or another since the thirteenth century. Henceforth, Irish people elected representatives to sit in the United Kingdom Parliament at Westminster. There were, of course, movements for repeal of the Union (Emmet's Rebellion, 1803, Daniel O'Connell's repeal movement in the 1840s, the Young Ireland Rising in 1848, and the Fenian Rising in 1867). However, these had been unsuccessful, and by the 1860s it looked as though Ireland was content to be part of the United Kingdom. In the 1868 general election, the loosely organised Liberals dominated parliamentary elections in Ireland, and William Gladstone, the Liberal prime minister, had pledged himself to pacify Ireland by redressing Irish grievances.

The 'national question'

Yet, from around 1870, the question of the relationship with Britain became a pressing one. Around that time there emerged a new sense of identity among the Catholic majority in Ireland. This new sense of identity supported various nationalist movements, which demanded home rule, the transfer of political power from Westminster to a restored Dublin parliament. By the mid-1880s, under Charles

Stewart Parnell, the constitutional nationalist movement not only dominated Irish politics, but also convinced Gladstone of the justice of the demand for home rule. The first home rule bill was defeated in the House of Commons in 1886 by thirty votes, but its introduction was more significant than its defeat. Its very introduction was a confession by a large section of British politicians that the union had failed and that there was something different about Ireland after all.

Thereafter, some form of self-government for Ireland was just a matter of time, the timing and content being determined by a complex interplay of party political rivalries in Britain and the determination of Irish Protestants, especially those in Ulster, to maintain the union with Britain. The 1920 government of Ireland act partially dismantled the United Kingdom and partitioned Ireland. Westminster gave up twenty-six of Ireland's thirty-two counties. Those twenty six counties, originally called the Irish Free State but now known as the Republic of Ireland, were given a large degree of self-government and a parliament of their own in Dublin.

The remaining six counties, henceforth Northern Ireland, had an equivocal status. They remained part of the United Kingdom, but had a parliament and government of their own with powers over 'domestic affairs'.

2. Diversity of Identity

The political history of the years 1800-1867 reflected the diversity of Ireland. National issues were from time to time agitated, but just as often people were absorbed in their own local or sectional affairs. Those years may be divided into four main periods.

Rebellion and Union, 1798-1801

The first period, 1798-1801, is a period of thwarted revolution and swift British counteraction. An attempted rebellion by the United Irishmen in 1798 precipitated the abolition of the Irish parliament by the Act of Union of 1800. The Irish parliament had existed in one form or another since the thirteenth century, but in 1800 it voted itself out of existence. Henceforth, Ireland was ruled directly by the Westminster parliament, in which Irish people had substantial representation.

Quiescence, 1801-23

The years 1801-23 were, in the main, a period of quiescence. There was another attempt at rebellion in 1803, but it was not serious. The only person supremely ready for the fray was the leader himself, Robert Emmet, splendidly attired in his green and white general's uniform. There was also some agitation for Catholic Emancipation, but on the whole the agitation was low-key.

The 'Age of O'Connell', 1823-47

The fun really started in 1823, and the years 1823-1847 may be described as the 'Age of O'Connell', as Daniel O'Connell emerged as a clever, charismatic leader who aroused Catholic Ireland from the apathy of the penal days. Philanderer and spendthrift though he was, O'Connell led an almost united Catholic Ireland in a dramatic movement for Catholic emancipation, which was reluctantly granted by Peel and Wellington 1829. In the 1830's, O'Connell operated largely in parliament and in alliance with the Whigs to win some reforms for Ireland, but in the 1840s he burst out again, this time leading a less united Catholic Ireland in a bid for the repeal of the Act of Union and the restoration of an Irish parliament.

His method of constitutional intimidation seemed too mild and his aims too vague for some younger Irish men, mainly Protestants, and they formed a new movement, Young Ireland, distinguished by a more clearly defined sense of Irish nationality and

increasingly committed to violent methods.

Both O'Connell and the Young Irelanders failed in their aims to modify the union. The British Government called O'Connell's bluff in 1843, and the most monster of his monster demonstrations - to be held at Clontarf just outside Dublin - was called off; while the Young Ireland revolt proved a damp squib in 1848 - at the height of the Great Famine.

Rampant localism, 1847-67

For the next thirty years or so, 1847-67, Irish politics was in the doldrums - at least nationally. An attempt to form an independent Irish party at Westminster foundered in the early 1850s, and national issues seemed to disappear altogether amidst a welter of apparently petty local interests. Elections were fought not on great national issues, but on highly local and even personalised issues. Take the borough of Waterford, for instance, a highly contested seat. In 1852 it was split into so many factions pursuing 'each other with invincible hatred' that party labels became meaningless. It was the same in the 1868 election, when nationally the important issues were land and disestablishment. Such momentous issues scarcely touched the electors of Waterford who were divided into powerful blocks, such as the Publicans, agitated about Sunday closing.

In this atmosphere attempts to nationalise politics, and to lift them onto what some saw as a higher plain, proved fruitless. The Fenian movement, founded in 1858 as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, was of immense long-term importance with its determination to establish a completely independent Irish republic by revolutionary means. However, in its early years, the Fenian movement made little impact upon Irish people, and in 1867 its oft postponed rising fizzled out as quickly as had the revolt of the Young Irelanders twenty years before.

Nor did attempts by constitutionalists to direct politics nationally fair any better. Here the re-organised Roman Catholic church, under Cardinal Paul Cullen, took the lead. In 1865 Cullen formed the National Association for Ireland, in an attempt to win reforms for Ireland within the framework of the Act of Union. The Association never, however, captured the public imagination and has been rightly described as a 'calm in a teacup'.

3. The 'National Question'

This was, however, the calm before the storm, because in the next fifty years the 'national question' became all-important and Britain lost Ireland - or most of it, eventually in bloody circumstances.

Home rule movement, 1870-1918

In 1870 there was formed the movement that was to dominate Irish politics for the next forty years or so - until 1916-18. This was, of course, the home rule movement, the moderate nationalist movement demanding a limited form of self-government for Ireland. Its advent amounted to a political revolution, for it took power out of the hands of the Protestant ascendancy and put it in the hands of the Catholic democracy. Catholics in Ireland had had the vote since 1793, and had been able to sit in parliament since 1829, and the Church of Ireland had been disestablished and partly disendowed in 1869. Nevertheless, until the 1880's the Catholic voters usually returned Protestant landowners, Whigs, Liberals and Conservatives, to parliament. The home rule movement, however, changed all this.

The beginnings were modest enough - with a Home Government Association of 1870 and the Home Rule League of 1873, but the movement really took off in the late 1870s under the leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell.

Parnell and the Land League crisis

The turning point came with the Land League crisis of 1879-81, when various classes in Ireland united to demand land reform, and nationalists quickly exploited this new unanimity. The back of landlord power was broken, and in the General Election of 1880, landlords, whether good or bad, were universally execrated. Henceforth, the two issues dominating Irish politics were Home Rule and Land Reform, two unequivocally 'national' issues.

Election results, 1868 and 1886

How far the face of Irish politics was transformed in those years may be judged by comparing the election figures for 1868 and 1886. In 1868, the Liberals dominated Irish parliamentary representation, winning 65 seats to the Conservatives 40. Nationalists, Home Rulers, or whatever, were nowhere in sight but, in 1886, Parnellites, Home Rulers, swept the board. Outside north-east Ulster and Trinity College, Dublin, no candidate, other than a pledge-bound member of Parnell's party, succeeded in winning a seat. In all, Home Rulers won 86 out of 105 seats in Ireland

in what was a triumph for democratic nationalism.

Irish Unionism

This overwhelming victory also polarised Irish politics, for it stimulated the counter movement among Irish Protestants - the Irish Unionist Movement - dedicated to maintaining intact the union between Great Britain and Ireland. At first, in 1885-86, there was an attempt to hold all Irish Protestants together in one broad-based Unionist Movement. Gradually, two distinctive brands of Irish Unionism emerged. The lesser known Southern Unionists consisted largely of the scattered landowners and big businessmen of the southern provinces, and they could only hope to fight Home Rule by constitutional means and through Westminster.

Ulster Unionists

In the north, however, the more compact Ulster Protestants organised themselves to resist Home Rule by force of arms if necessary, and their determination to do so was made only too clear in the years 1912-14 when, under Sir Edward Carson and James Craig, they formed a provisional government backed by an armed volunteer force of some 100,000 men.

Indeed, the clash between Nationalism and Unionism was not merely a clash of political ideologies. It also, at times, took on the aspect of a clash of cultures. With the onset of the Gaelic revival, from the 1880's onwards, Irish Nationalism seemed almost racially exclusive. People of English or Scottish descent, no matter how long they had lived in Ireland, were regarded by some as beyond the pale. According to some, to be Irish was to be Gaelic. To become a true Irishman, the Gaelic League asserted, required the de-Anglicisation of oneself.

Anglo-Irish relations

Not only did the rise of the home rule movement transform and polarise Irish politics, it also transformed the nature of Anglo-Irish relations and British politics. All parties in Britain began to re-examine their attitudes towards Ireland. The Conservatives began considering reforms which would have been denounced as revolutionary and socialist if attempted in Britain, while the Liberal Party, under Gladstone, became committed to Home Rule. In 1886, Gladstone introduced his first Home Rule Bill, which failed in the Commons, and in 1893, his second Home Rule Bill was defeated in the House of Lords. Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule finally split the Liberal Party. Nevertheless, despite the strains, the party remained committed to Home Rule, and Herbert Henry Asquith's government introduced the third Home Rule Bill in 1912. This Bill actually reached the Statute Book in December 1914.

Irish Republicans, 1914-21

Had the Home Rule Bill become law sooner, and had it actually come into operation, the last of period Irish politics under the Union might not have occurred. The Home Rule Act never came into operation and the final period of Irish politics under the Union witnessed the eclipse of constitutional Nationalism and the ascendancy of Irish Republicanism. The new Nationalists, a younger generation perhaps, wanted not a mild measure of Home Rule within the British Empire, but the establishment of a completely independent Irish Republic. What is more, they were prepared to fight and die to get the Republic, which they did with the Easter Rising of 1916 and the Anglo-Irish War of 1919-21.

Partition

The violence of these years certainly convinced Britain of the desirability of slackening the ties between Britain and Ireland, but Britain was still in no mood to surrender completely to the demands of the Irish Republicans for an independent republic ruling the whole of Ireland. Instead, when the Act of Union was repealed, Ireland was partitioned, and the Nationalist part, as well as the Unionist part, remained within the British Empire.

The Government of Ireland Act of 1920 set up two Irish Governments and Parliaments, northern and southern Ireland, both as integral parts of the United Kingdom. The Act came into operation in the north in 1921, and remained the constituent act of Northern Ireland until 1972. The 1920 Acts never came into operation in the south, but although it was superseded in December 1921 by the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the Treaty confirmed partition and set up not a republic in the south, but a dominion, the Irish Free State, acknowledged in King George V and his heirs as head.

4. Diversity and Peace

National aspirations, local realities

This nationalisation of Irish politics, did not spell the end of localism, which had been a feature of politics before 1870. Some things had changed, particularly the political integration of the west of Ireland, but ‘community politics’ survived, especially with the development of peasant proprietorship.

County Clare, 1912-21

Nowhere is this persistence of localism in Irish politics better illustrated than in the Anglo-Irish War. Nationalist rhetoric may have emphasised the monolithic nature of the Irish people and Irish society, but the truth was otherwise, as was underlined by the experience of County Clare in the years 1912-21. In those crucial years, the eyes of the people of County Clare ‘were turned inwards’ and their hopes and dreams ‘could only be realised in or near their own parishes at home’.

Fragmentation during the Anglo-Irish War

Thus, for example, the Irish Volunteers of the County had by 1918, to be organised into three divisions instead of one, and this was because there existed three ambitious families, the Barretts, the Brennans and the O’Donnells, who could not be contained within one division, and headquarters in Dublin was very careful to respect the power bases and susceptibilities of the three families. Again, the appointment by headquarters of numerous inspectors and the publication of directives and training magazines, suggested that the Volunteers were, by early 1921, being steadily consolidated into a centralised and disciplined, if not very effective, national army.

However, in the moonlight world of the flying column, central authority and the national interest cut very shadowy figures. Analysis of the revolutionary army in Clare suggests that each knot of fighters guarded its territory, secrets and rifles, with fierce jealousy against any intruders. Thus, for example, a battalion commandant was sent into a neighbouring district to help arrange an ambush. He was ordered out by the local commandant. He nevertheless proceeded with the ambush without local help, but the attack was unsuccessful. Similarly, a commandant recently installed by a headquarters inspector, arranged with a neighbouring commandant that the latter should attack a military patrol if it entered his territory. The patrol came, but no volunteers were there to destroy it. Indeed, in the very months the Dublin publicists

were trumpeting most boldly the theme of Republican unity in face of the Terror, the IRA was divided and fragmenting to an astonishing degree.

What all this boils down to is that the unity and unanimity of the Irish nation should not be over-exaggerated. Fragmented localism was the norm. O'Connell and Parnell may have wrenched their countrymen from those ways of sporadic action for local and sectional interest into those of national demands and national issues. But these mobilisations were only temporary. National politics was often no more than surface politics.

Peace in Ireland

Constitutionalism in the south

Nor did the settlement of 1920-21 bring permanent peace to Ireland. The Irish Free State was torn by civil war in 1922 and 1923 over the question of dominion status. The die-hard Republicans, the 'Irregulars', were soon defeated and since then had enjoyed a stable system of parliamentary government.

Northern Ireland: a Protestant state

Northern Ireland almost dissolved amidst anarchy in its first eighteen months but survived only to store up future trouble. By the late 1960s, the government of Northern Ireland, which had become in some senses a Protestant state for a Protestant people, was increasingly challenged by the Catholic community, which comprised one-third of the population of Northern Ireland. The resultant political violence prompted the intervention of the British army in August 1969 and the suspension of the government and parliament of Northern Ireland in March 1972, since when Northern Ireland has been ruled directly from Westminster.

Communal violence

That direct rule did not actually reconcile people in Northern Ireland was underlined by the high degree of political violence which in the 1970s placed Northern Ireland fourth or fifth in a world league table of communal violence.