

Gladstone and Ireland

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1. Gladstone and Ireland : Some Questions

One of the most interesting problems of nineteenth century British history is William Ewart Gladstone's obsession with Irish affairs. Ireland was the theme of his first ministry. It was on the afternoon of 1 December, 1868, when Gladstone was in his shirtsleeves wielding an axe, felling trees, that a telegraph messenger arrived with the news that he had been charged with the formation of his first cabinet. He remarked, 'Very significant' and at once resumed his work. However, after a few minutes, the blow ceased and Gladstone, resting on the handle of his axe, looked up and with a deep earnestness in his voice exclaimed, 'My mission is to pacify Ireland'. He then resumed his chopping and did not stop until the tree was felled.

Even more significant was Gladstone's conversion to home rule. In December 1885, after the general election when Liberals needed nationalist support to hold office, Gladstone's conversion to home rule became known through the indiscretion of his son, Herbert, and, on 8 April 1886, Gladstone introduced, at the cost of party unity, his first home rule bill. The bill proposed an Irish parliament to deal with purely Irish affairs.

To make more manageable Gladstone's concern for Ireland five questions need to be asked and answered:

1. What did Gladstone actually do in Ireland?
2. Why did Gladstone personally take such an interest in Irish affairs?
3. How can the timing of his different Irish initiatives, spread out as they were, be explained?
4. How was Gladstone, as leader of the Liberal Party, able to commit his party almost exclusively to home rule after 1886?
5. How far did Ireland and Irish concerns benefit from Gladstone's intervention?

2. Gladstone's Irish Measures

The answer to the question, 'What did Gladstone do in Ireland?', can be readily summed up under three headings. His mission to Ireland involved attempts to address Irish grievances in relation to religion, land, and home rule.

Religion

Gladstone disestablished and partially disendowed the Church of Ireland, the Protestant established Church in Ireland since Henry VIII introduced the Reformation there. The disestablishment and partial disendowment occurred in 1869, during Gladstone's first spell as Prime Minister, 1868-1874.

Gladstone also tried to do something in the Irish countryside to remedy tenants' complaints about landlords. He passed two measures. His 1870 Land Act, his first Land Act, made eviction more difficult. During his second ministry, 1880-85, he introduced his second Land Act. It was on the same lines as the previous measure but went further in introducing what were known as the three Fs - fair rent, free sale and freedom from eviction. These measures clipped the powers of the landlords to the tenants' immediate advantage. Whether Ireland or Irish agriculture was better off for these measures is open to doubt.

Home rule

Gladstone also tried to modify the Act of Union and attempted to restore a parliament in Dublin, which had been abolished in 1800. His first home rule bill was defeated in the House of Commons in June 1886. His second home rule bill passed the Commons in 1893 but was defeated in the House of Lords. Not until 1920-21 did Ireland achieve qualified independence.

These three sets of measures, dealing with religion, land and home rule, largely sum up Gladstone's mission to Ireland. Despite their many limitations, his measures did amount to a significant departure in British politics. It was unusual for any British minister to have an Irish policy.

3. Gladstone's Interest in Ireland

The key to understanding why Gladstone took such a fervent interest in Ireland is his deep sense of religion and of sin.

Evangelical upbringing

Gladstone's evangelical upbringing had left its mark which was evident in both his private and his public life. Daily prayer in the morning and evening, daily reading of the Holy Scripture, and the habit of inwardly turning his thoughts to God, all mark out Gladstone as a man immediately moved by religion. He thus saw politics and political issues in terms of morals and Irish affairs were no exception.

England's Irish wrongs

Gladstone thought that England owed much to Ireland because of Ireland's past history. He believed that England had wronged Ireland, as was very evident in his attitude towards the land question. Gladstone told the House of Commons that the various land settlements in Ireland had violated the old customs of the country and, thus, he concluded we English

cannot wash ourselves clean of the responsibility. The deeds of the Irish landlords are to a great extent our deeds. We are *principes criminis*; we, with power in our hands, looked on; we not only looked on ... we encouraged and sustained.

Convinced that Ireland and the Irish had suffered great wrongs, Gladstone thought that nineteenth century England had a moral duty to make reparations.

Atonement by honest government

Gladstone thought that England should govern Ireland honestly, even at the sacrifice of cherished principles in order to atone for past and present grievances. This high moral conception of Anglo-Irish relations leaps out from his often quoted letter to his wife in 1845:

Ireland, Ireland! that cloud in the west, that coming storm, the minister of God's retribution from cruel and inveterate and but half-atoned justice! Ireland forces upon us these great social and religious questions. God grant that we may have courage to look them in the face and to work through them.

This high moral conception enabled Gladstone to put a high priority on Irish issues after 1868. In the election of that year he advocated Irish reforms and said that on the day they come

the heart of Ireland will leap for joy, and the mind and conscience of England and Scotland will repose with thankful satisfaction upon the thought that something has been done towards the discharge of national duty, and towards deepening and widening the foundation of public strength, security, and peace.

In similar vein he had earlier written to his sister that although he could not expect to 'live politically to see the Irish question settled', he had taken up the question in the name of 'the God of Truth and Justice'. In sum, Gladstone convinced himself that he had a divinely-guided personal mission to solve Ireland's problems.

Not 'soft' on the Irish

This intensely moral view of Anglo-Irish relations needs stressing, because it corrects the view that Gladstone was soft on the Irish. He was not nearly so sentimental about the Irish people as some of his contemporaries believed and later writers have assumed. He spent only three weeks in Ireland - in 1877 - and on the whole he disliked the Catholicity of Ireland and the Irish.

Moreover, although converted to the view that the Irish were right about their grievances, Gladstone did not accept that the Irish were the best judges of what remedies were needed. That was a matter for his decision under providential guidance.

For the sake of England

Indeed, it can be argued that Gladstone's crusade was for England's sake rather than for the sake of Ireland. Gladstone told the whole House of Commons that the removal of Ireland's grievances was an English duty 'so that instead of hearing in every corner of Europe the most painful commentaries on the policy of England towards Ireland we may be able to look our fellow Europeans in the face'. As one historian has recently remarked:

In comments like these, the English orientation of Gladstone's view comes through clearly. J.L. Hammond's classic treatment of Gladstone's concern with Ireland is entitled *Gladstone and the Irish Nation*. Yet it has more to do with the English nation, as did Gladstone himself. His attempts to persuade England to act extend more from concern for England's character than for what Ireland would gain: often his main focus of interest seems to have been the creation of a holy, moral English

nation, shriven from the great stain of his Irish guilt.

4. Timing

I. Disestablishment and Land

This intensely moral view of Anglo-Irish relations may explain the nature of Gladstone's interest in Ireland. It does not, however, explain the timing of specific initiatives. There is, for example, a very long gap between his statement of the problem in 1845 and his first remedial measures in 1869 and 1870. What governed the timing, and to some extent the content, of Gladstone's Irish policy was the need to respond to events and circumstances.

Political reality, not long-term programmes

In this respect, Gladstone was like any other party politician. He was governed by political reality. He had no long-term overall programme for the reconciliation and reconstruction of Ireland. Rather he was governed by the need to win majorities and by the need to respond to the demands of the moment. Thus the timing of Gladstone's intervention in Irish affairs was determined by the logic of events in Ireland and the needs of the electoral and parliamentary situation in Britain.

Fenianism and reform

Thus Gladstone's first reforming burst of legislation did not occur until the late 1860s. What prompted this reforming outburst was not some divine inspiration or sudden gush of philanthropy on Gladstone's part. Fenian violence prompted his reforms. The Fenian rising had fizzled out one evening midst rain and snow in March 1867, but the Fenians then transferred their attention to Britain. In September 1867 they rescued two prisoners in Manchester, killing a policeman in the process. In the following December an attempt to rescue another Fenian prisoner at Clerkenwell involved an explosion in which more than twenty people were killed. These Fenian outrages focused attention on Ireland and such concentration obliged all British parties to consider Irish policies.

The Non-Conformist vote

If the timing of Gladstone's first Irish initiative was determined by events, the content was largely determined by Gladstone's electoral needs. The particular line of the policy he adopted was Church and landlord bashing - the disestablishment and partial

disendowment of the Church of Ireland, and curbing the rights of Irish landlords. It just so happened that this policy was the most profitable electorally in Britain. It was a policy that appealed to the growing and increasingly organised Non-Conformist vote upon which Gladstone came to rely for his parliamentary majority.

The same sort of comments can be made on Gladstone's Irish policy in the early 1880s. His second Land Act, in 1881, was an ill-considered response to massive agitation launched by the Land League, as a result of a collapse of Irish agricultural prosperity at the end of the 1870s.

5. Timing

II. Home Rule

Again, there was nothing inevitable in Gladstone's taking up home rule. Although he liked to claim after 1886 that he had always considered the necessity of home rule, his record does not bear out such self-justification.

Gladstone the unionist

Until 1885 he thought that a combination of reform within the Union and co-ercion could pacify Ireland. While his measures to deprive the Anglo-Irish ascendancy of its privilege and property were taking effect, Gladstone was quite willing to apply co-ercion, and it is often forgotten that in 1868 and 1883, he made seven speeches advocating half a dozen measures which restricted or suspended the normal liberties of people in Ireland. This was in addition to his spirited defence in 1884 of Lord Spencer's administration of co-ercion during the previous two years.

Ireland, was, indeed too important to the Empire to let go lightly. Gladstone knew this all too well. It was not, therefore, until 1885 that Gladstone decided upon home rule, a conversion announced publicly after the 1885 general election.

Political expediency?

Gladstone's conversion to home rule is an apparent gift to cynics, dismissive of the high-minded in politics. It just so happened that Gladstone's conversion to home rule was announced after it had become clear that the future of any government depended upon the Irish nationalist vote - the 86 Irish nationalist MPs returned during the election holding the balance between Liberals and Conservatives in the House of Commons. Gladstone thus appeared to be willing to sell out on Ireland for the sake of office and this was a view widely held by his critics for a long time.

Conversion before the election

This is not a tenable view. Dependence upon the Irish vote may subsequently have kept up Gladstone's conversion, but his initial conversion to home rule had been completed before the elections. This is very clear from letters to certain colleagues and friends.

In September 1885, Hugh Childers wrote to Gladstone seeking his approval for a

`tolerably full-fledged scheme of home rule'. Gladstone replied, on 28 September, `I have a decided sympathy with the general scope and spirit of your proposed declaration about Ireland. If I offer any observations, they are meant to be simply in furtherance of your purpose.' The observations Gladstone offered suggested that Childers, while stating his readiness to consider an Irish legislature for matters not of imperial concern, should mention the details `veiled in language not such as to commit you'. All the evidence suggests that this response to Childers reflected with reasonable accuracy the state of Gladstone's opinion on Ireland at the time.

The ungovernability of Ireland

By 1885, therefore, Gladstone had recognised the necessity for establishing a separate parliament in Dublin. This realisation arose out of the debacle of his 1881-85 ministry. As far as Irish affairs were concerned, that ministry had been a rancorous one. The only concrete reform had been the 1881 Land Act, establishing the 3Fs and dual ownership, and much of the time had been spent in mutual recrimination between the Liberals and the Irish against the background of soaring crime rates in Ireland, a succession of co-ercion acts and the imprisonment of Parnell.

Gladstone had accused nationalists of `marching through plunder to the disintegration of the Empire' and had warned that in dealing with them `the resources of civilisation were not exhausted'. For their part, nationalists railed against a government which perpetuated `England's cruel wrongs'. As one nationalist verse lamenting Parnell's imprisonment put it:

Before this wrong all other wrongs of Ireland do grow pale,
For they've clapped the pride of Erin's Isle into could Kilmainham Jail.
It was the tyrant Gladstone, and he said unto himself
'I niver will be aisy till Parnell is on the shelf.
'So make the warrant out in haste and take it by the mail,
'and we'll clap the pride of Erin's Isle into could Kilmainham Jail.'
So Buchshot [Foster, the Chief Secretary] took the warrant and buttoned up his coat
And tuk the train to Holyhead to catch the Kingstown boat.

This sort of behaviour and mutual recrimination convinced Gladstone of the need for home rule. He became convinced that England could no longer govern Ireland except by co-ercion, and the existence of the party system made consistent co-ercion impossible.

Rule of law stripped of `foreign garb'

If the rule of ordinary law were to be restored, it could be done only under an Irish parliament. Gladstone thought that by only allowing Irish people to make their own laws that the normal rule of law would be restored in Ireland. As he told the House of Commons in 1886, introducing his first home rule bill:

The basis of the whole mischief ... [is] that rightly or wrongly ... the law is discredited in Ireland, and discredited in Ireland upon this ground especially - that it comes to the people of that country with a foreign accent, and in a foreign garb there is an alternative ... widely known to various countries in the world, where this dark and difficult problem has been solved by the comparatively natural and simple, though not always easy, expedient of stripping law of its foreign garb, and investing it with a domestic character....

I do not deny the general good intentions of Parliament on a variety of great and conspicuous occasions, and its desire to pass good laws for Ireland. But let me say that, in order to work out the purposes of government, there is something more in this world occasionally required than even the passing of good laws. It is sometimes requisite not only that good laws should be passed, but also that they should be passed by proper persons. The passing of many good laws is not enough in cases where the strong permanent instincts of the people, their distinctive marks of character, their situation and history of the country require not only that these laws be good, but that they should proceed from a congenial and native source, and besides being good laws should be their own laws.

His own worst enemy

The dating of Gladstone's conversion to home rule before the results of the 1885 general election were known raises the question why did he delay in announcing his conversion to home rule. Part of the answer is that Gladstone may have hoped that the Tories under Salisbury would carry home rule with Liberal and nationalist support. Influenced by the precedence of Catholic Emancipation (1829), the Repeal of the Corn Laws (1846) and the Second Reform Act (1867), Gladstone considered that the repeal of the Union could surely be carried by a Conservative government, supported by Liberal votes to counterbalance the defection of extremist Tories.

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, there was the personal factor. It may be that Gladstone kept silent for so long, because he delighted to play the role of a prophet whose inspired message pronounced at the appropriate hour would show his followers the road to the promised land.

6. Carrying the Liberal Party

Gladstone's disillusionment after his trying 1881-85 ministry may explain his conversion and commitment to home rule, but it is not sufficient to explain how he was able to foist home rule upon his party and push it to the forefront of the party's programme. What enabled Gladstone as leader of the party to indulge in single issue politics was the precarious state of the Liberal Party by the mid-1880s. It was the divided state of the party that enabled Gladstone to make home rule the main plank for the Liberal platform.

Liberal 'faddism'

By the 1880s the besetting weakness of the Liberal Party was sectionalism. The party seemed to be simply a coalition of adherence to various reform interests, each of whom believed that the reform which he favoured was the most important of all and the most deserving of attention by the party leadership. This 'faddism', as it came to be known, threatened the unity of the party, and by 1885 the party was never more disunited, the final split between the Chamberlainite radicals and the Whigs seemingly imminent.

What the party needed was a rallying point, an issue around which all Liberals could unite and which would impose an order of priorities on the party.

Ireland: the rallying point

Here the Irish question was useful and in November 1885 Gladstone expressed the belief that Ireland would act on all other issues 'like the sun on a fire in the grate'. He realised that by taking up home rule he would split the party, but this did not concern him unduly. He thought that a party ought to be 'an instrument for the attainment of great ends', and that a split, by casting off extremes, would lead to the emergence of a party more united and more capable of common and collective action. The home rule preoccupation thus offered at least a temporary remedy for faddism, particularly as it was acceptable to rank and file Liberals for two reasons.

Clearing the line

In the first place, the Irish question was projected as an obstacle to progress in British politics. Liberals claimed that Ireland consumed so much of the time and demanded so much of the attention of parliament and political leaders that no satisfactory

progress was possible on any domestic reform question until Irish people were enabled by the concession of home rule to attend to Irish affairs themselves. Until the Irish question was settled, no progress could be made with the ordinary work of the Liberal Party.

The image most often used to describe the obstruction provided by Ireland was that of a blocked railway line. For example, Lord Spencer likened Ireland to an express train that 'stops the line' so that all other trains 'laden with precious measures valued by the Liberty Party' were 'blocked and shunted' until it had passed by. Thus the home rule policy was associated with the maintenance of a general Liberal faith in progress.

A moral issue

The second reason that made single issue politics acceptable to Liberals was Gladstone's projection of home rule as a moral issue. The salient feature of evangelical Victorian Protestantism was a sense of sin, piercing and profound, and Non-Conformists readily responded to being told by Gladstone in 1886 that 'it is one of the uniform and unfailing rules that guide human judgement ... but when a relation has existed between a nation of superior strength and one of inferior strength, and when that relation has gone wrong ... the guilt rests, in the main, upon the strong rather than the weak'. Gladstone, in fact, made the fight for home rule seem like a 'fight for righteousness, for humanity, for God', as one Baptist minister put it.

All this is not to say that Gladstone took up home rule simply to re-unite the party. Obviously the momentum of the Irish question and Gladstone's own political thinking influenced his ideas on policy. Nevertheless, the state of the Liberal Party enabled him to take up the issue with some confidence.

7. Did Ireland Benefit?

I. The Land Question

It is a matter of debate as to how far Ireland and Irish concerns benefited from Gladstone's intervention. It may be that the benefits were far outweighed by the future problems his policy stirred up.

Benefits

It is true that Gladstone focused attention on Ireland and it is also true that the disestablishment and partial disendowment of the Church of Ireland satisfactorily moved the longstanding grievance. Nevertheless, the wisdom of his attitudes to land and home rule are open to question.

Land policy

Gladstone's land legislation of 1870 and 1881 aimed at curbing the rights of Irish landlords and transferring more rights to tenants. In doing so, it has generally been regarded as a 'good thing', going some way to solving the problems that had retarded Irish agricultural development and prompted Irish unrest. However, it is doubtful whether Gladstonian land policy was really in the best interest of Ireland and Irish agriculture as a whole.

Misplaced motives

In the first place, Gladstone's motives were misplaced. Gladstone was not looking for a solution to the problem of Irish agricultural backwardness. Rather, he was looking for a dramatic gesture that would end Irish agitation and redeem England's good name. His land policy was part of his attempt to create a holy, moral English nation, shriven from the great stain of his Irish guilt.

Ill-conceived measures

Rapacious landlords?

The second criticism of Gladstone's land policy is that it was so ill-conceived that it served only to exacerbate the problems besetting Irish agriculture. The deficiencies stemmed from his motives. Gladstone was looking for a sacrificial victim and found him in the Irish landlord who was quickly sacrificed on the altars of English purity and Irish nationalism. He had managed to convince himself that the roots of the Irish land problem and agrarian agitation lay in a system of land-ownership which enabled

rack-renting, freely-evicting and oppressive landlords to stunt initiative and enterprise on the part of tenants.

Mis-diagnosis

However, that was a false picture. Rapacious landlordism was not a barrier to agricultural improvement. Landlords were hardly oppressive. Rather, they were dedicated to a policy of live and let live. In fact, if landlords can be criticised at all, it is not for oppression, but rather for being too tolerant. They can be criticised for not exploiting their estates efficiently and economically and for not providing tenants with sufficient incentive (by way of high rents, etc.) to farm more efficiently and thus to be able to withstand falling prices and increased foreign competition later in the century.

Increased tension in the Irish countryside

Such evidence Gladstone chose to ignore. He was not interested in the economic and technical problems arising from attempts to modernise methods and output on the small farms that predominated in Ireland. Concerned rather with the redemption of English guilt, Gladstone's land legislation offered a solution to neither the problem of Irish agricultural backwardness nor the problem of Irish agitation against British rule.

Gladstonian land legislation simply re-distributed agricultural income in favour of the tenants. It did nothing to increase Irish agricultural prosperity. Instead, it emphasised a conflict of interest between landlord and tenant. It diverted attention away from the need to make Irish agriculture more efficient and more competitive. It discouraged landlord investment. It encouraged farmers to continue inefficient practices.

In a phrase, Gladstonian legislation was a bad thing. It was easier to attack Irish landlords than to tackle the more fundamental problem of Irish agricultural development.

8. Did Ireland Benefit?

II. Home Rule

Benefits

Undoubtedly, Gladstone did commit a major British party to home rule and thus did much to bolster up constitutionalism in Ireland. Nevertheless, the way in which Gladstone took up home rule rebounded upon the home rule movement in at least two ways.

Pacification, not satisfaction

In the first place, as his mission was to pacify rather than to satisfy Ireland, Gladstone's reform programme almost became another exercise in English domination. Irish people never forgot this.

An emotive issue

In the second place, the nature of Gladstone's commitment to renewing Anglo-Irish relations prevented rational discussion of that question. Irish affairs demanded a calm, non-party appraisal in an atmosphere of rational tolerance, but they had no chance of that in Gladstone's hands. Gladstone was by any standards a controversial and crusading figure, and any cause he took up attracted the loves and hatreds which he himself evoked. By making a crusade out of Ireland and making the issue an emotive one, Gladstone provoked traditional anti-Irish and anti-Catholic animus and prejudice which were more vigorous and influential than any emotion that might be generated by Liberal ideology.

This was very evident in the way that he announced his conversion to home rule, refusing to admit any change of policy and insisting upon consistency. This infuriated his opponents who described Gladstone in various unflattering ways. 'An honest man with a not dishonest mind', said the historian Lecky. According to one Ulsterman, 'Gladstone is an inscrutable mystery of whom it is impossible to say whether he is a saint perverted by vanity or ambition or a madman who honestly mistakes the suggestion of parliamentary advantage for the inspiration of true wisdom'. Others were less polite. Gladstone was 'mad' with the look of a 'bird of prey' and 'the smile of a hyena'.

Gladstone and the Irish opponents of home rule

A concrete illustration of the way Gladstone misjudged the home rule issue and stored up future trouble was his complete underestimation of the Irish opponents of home rule - the Irish unionists, the Irish landowning ascendancy in the south, and the Ulster Protestants in the north. Gladstone consistently refused to recognise that there was any real opposition to home rule in Ireland, apart from that offered by a few Irish landlords.

No understanding of Ulster unionism

In particular, Ulster Protestantism, and then Ulster unionism, were completely outside his range of comprehension. Like other Liberals and Irish nationalists, he tended to dismiss Ulster Unionists' fulminations and threats of armed resistance as mere 'orangeade' and made no attempt to assuage Ulster unionists' fears and overcome their opposition. This proved to be a serious miscalculation, for Ulster unionism was not an artificially contrived movement based merely on religious bigotry. Rather it represented the distinctive regional character of the north east of Ireland, which was separated from the rest of Ireland, by religion, history and economics.

Gladstone's refusal to recognise how divided Irish people were meant that the home rule movement was constantly frustrated, not only by British Conservatives, but also by the Ulster unionists who finally forced the partition of Ireland in 1920-21. A more accommodating approach initially, an attempt by English Liberals and Irish nationalists to develop a nationalist philosophy that emphasised Irish brotherhood instead of territorial integrity, might have made the modern history of Ireland a less tragic one.

Failure of the Union

As it was, feet-in-first Gladstone failed to examine the implications of his home rule policy, which was of a piece with the whole trend of English policy towards Ireland under the Union. Measures were too often taken to protect immediate British interest rather than to foster the interest of Ireland for the United Kingdom as a whole. Measures were often based upon inadequate information and were often so ill-conceived as merely to gloss over one problem while creating another.