

Losing Ireland 1868-1886

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1. Losing Ireland, 1868-86

During the course of the nineteenth century, Britain lost Ireland. The Act of Union in 1800 made Ireland part of the United Kingdom. It abolished the Irish parliament, which had existed in one form or another since the thirteenth century. Irish people no longer had a parliament of their own in Dublin. Instead, they elected representatives to sit in the United Kingdom parliament at Westminster. One hundred and twenty years later, the United Kingdom was partially dismantled. Westminster gave up twenty-six of Ireland's thirty two counties. The twenty six counties, now known as the Republic of Ireland, were given a large degree of self-government or home rule and a parliament of their own in Dublin.

An inevitable loss?

It is often assumed that the break-up of the United Kingdom was inevitable, the inevitable working out of the historic conflict between British imperialism and Irish nationalism, between the Anglo-Saxon and Evil on the one hand and Erin and Virtue on the other hand. This explanation is too deterministic, taking little account of historical circumstances. Rather than being inevitable, the break-up of the United Kingdom was the result of the historical circumstances of the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly the years 1868-1886.

What is the significance of the years 1868-1886?

The years 1868-1886 were of revolutionary significance in Anglo-Irish relations. It is no exaggeration to say that the years 1868-1886 represent a turning point in Anglo-Irish relations in two respects: a new Catholic identity; and a recognition by the British Liberal party that the Union was not working.

2. Catholic Identity

The years 1868-86 saw the emergence of a new Irish Catholic sense of identity. In the earlier part of the century Irish men and Irish women defined and identified themselves in various ways, with different and often conflicting family, class and local loyalties. After about 1870, conflicting interests and loyalties remained, and localism persisted as a powerful force. Nevertheless, an overriding movement emerged which mobilised Irish opinion and mobilised it on such a scale that Ireland came to be regarded as a separate nation.

Politics of home rule

Judged by their political behaviour, Irishmen began to see themselves in a different light. Outside of Ulster, they subscribed *en masse* to a new and common sense of identity, which found expression in the demand for the re-establishment of a Dublin parliament. The extent of the transformation of Irish politics and the way Irish men defined themselves is clear from general election results between 1868 and 1886.

Election results: political barometer

By the late 1860s it seemed as though Ireland was well wedded to the English system. After the 1868 general election the loosely organised liberals dominated parliamentary elections, and we have seen previously some of the considerations which motivated electors in mid-century. In 1868 liberals won 66 seats to the conservatives 39. No nationalists, neither home rulers nor republicans, were returned, and William Gladstone, the Liberal Prime Minister, was pledged to pacify Ireland by redressing Irish grievances. Yet over the next 20 years Irish politics were transformed, as a national movement developed overriding local loyalties and almost obliterating other social bonds, particularly those between landlord and tenant.

Modest beginnings: Home Government Association, 1870

The change began modestly enough in 1870, when Isaac Butt, a Donegal Protestant, founded the Home Government Association (HGA) to re-establish an Irish parliament with control over all domestic affairs. Originally very Protestant and very conservative, the HGA transformed itself in 1873 into the more popular Home Rule League.

Home Rule League, 1873

The new Home Rule League adopted a broader platform and arranged its policy in the significant order of denominational education, land without rent and home rule. Success was almost instantaneous. In the 1874 general election the home rulers won 60 seats instead of the 30 they had expected. It was a most significant result since it led to the formation of the home rule party in the House of Commons. This Irish Parliamentary Party dominated Irish parliamentary representation for the next forty years.

Irish National Land League, 1879

Six years later the 1880 general election witnessed a Catholic democratic revolution in Irish representation as a result of the activities of the Irish National Land League, formed in October 1879. 63 home rulers were returned, but the figures are less important than the atmosphere in which the election was fought. Landlords, whether good or bad, were almost universally execrated and at this election landlord influence was finally broken, thereby paving the way for a democratic nationalist movement.

Routing of the landlords

How complete was the route and demoralisation of the landlords was all too clear in a letter written by Arthur MacMurrough Kavanagh - the limbless Carlow landlord who became an expert horseman and yachtsman. Defeated in the 1880 election in Carlow and burned in effigy by his own tenants, this is what a disillusioned Kavanagh wrote to his wife:

It would be folly to deny that the blow is a sharp one but to me it was not unexpected, for I always felt how hollow was the ground we stood upon.

The sharpest part of it is the belief that is forced upon me that the majority of my own men broke their promises to me. My confidence in them is gone and a great interest and pleasure in home-life gone with it. That is the poisoned stab. If I could have believed them true, the actual defeat would be easy to bear, because I have nothing that I can ever see to be ashamed of in it. But to have to look forward to passing the rest of my life among them is almost more than I can do. I do not think more than forty of my fellows gave me a vote. But there is no good brooding over it and one must guard against the natural impulse to resent it, which God alone can help one to do.

Do not, my darling, fret yourself for me. I look upon the defeat as God's will and will try to take it as such The sting that rankles is the treachery and deceit of my own men, but that feeling must be choked.

Uneasy alliance

Yet, although the Land League agitation put the home rule movement on its feet, it also raised a serious problem. The Land League represented an uneasy alliance between constitutionalists and revolutionaries, and in the early 1880s it seemed as though the latter were in danger of getting the upper hand. That danger was underlined in May 1882 by the gruesome Phoenix Park murders, when the new chief secretary for Ireland (Lord Frederick Cavendish) and the undersecretary (T.H. Burke) were cut to death in the park with surgical knives.

Irish National League, 1882

What was needed was a device to channel energies into constitutional agitation, and this was provided in the fourth phase in the emergence of the constitutional nationalist movement. The formation in October 1882 of the Irish National League provided such a device, for it was a modern mass party with some 1,000 branches so organised as to keep the grass roots and the MPs under the control of the party leader.

1885 general election

The results of the 1885 general election demonstrated how successful was the National League. Parnellites swept the board. Outside eastern Ulster and Trinity College, Dublin, no candidate other than pledge bound party members succeeded in winning a seat. In all, home rulers won 85 of Ireland's 103 seats. It was truly a triumph of democratic nationalism, marking the new sense of Irish identity and the beginning of the break-up of the United Kingdom.

3. Gladstone's Conversion to Home Rule

So this was the first way in which the years 1868-1886 were revolutionary: the emergence of the Catholic democratic nationalist movement, demanding home rule for Ireland. The second way in which these years were significant was the British response to this demand or at least Gladstone's response.

Gladstone: unionist

Until 1885 Gladstone was a firm supporter of the Union. He may have recognised that Ireland had justified complaints about British rule, but he thought that they could be remedied by Westminster's dismantling the old Protestant, landed ascendancy. Thus in his first ministry, 1868-74, he disestablished and partially disendowed the Church of Ireland, introduced a measure of land reform, and even tried to increase provision for higher education in Ireland. While these reforms were taking effect, Gladstone was willing to enforce the law against 'agitators'.

Gladstone: home ruler

Nevertheless, by the mid-1880s he had changed his mind. Gladstone responded to the continued growth of the home rule movement by introducing in 1886 his first home rule bill. It was rejected by the House of Commons in June by 30 votes, but its very introduction was both a confession of failure by a large section of British politicians that the union had failed and that there was something different about Ireland after all.

4. Why Did Irish Nationalists Reject the Union?

Irish nationalists claimed that British rule was both incompetent and unjust, taking little account of Ireland's interests. And, of course, the most widely quoted example of alleged British incompetence and injustice was the Great Famine, 1845-51, during which Ireland lost over 2 million people either from death or emigration.

British rule was less oppressive and malevolent than Irish nationalists liked to claim and the Union did make a positive contribution to the development of modern Ireland. Nevertheless, British rule left much to be desired, for English people were ill-equipped to deal with Irish affairs with knowledge and with sympathy. And Irish people were fully aware of this. As early as 1829, Daniel O'Connell had written to a Jewish friend,

You must not confide in English liberality. It is a plant not congenial to the British soil. It must be *forced*. It requires a *hot-bed*. Before the so styled Reformation the English tortured Jews and strung up scores of Lollards. After that Reformation they still roasted the Jews and hung the Papists. In Mary's day the English with usual cruelty retaliated the tortures on the Protestants. After her short reign there were near two centuries of the most barbarous and unrelenting cruelty exercised towards Catholics... The Jews too suffered in the same way. I once more repeat. Do not confide in any liberality but that which you will rouse yourself into action and *compel* into operation.

5. Why Did the Challenge to the Union Occur?

I. Social Changes

The growth of the home rule movement, and the response it met in Britain, raises the question why did Parnell's home rule movement have more impact than, say, Daniel O'Connell's repeal movement in the 1840s. The reasons for the challenge included changes in Irish society, agrarian crisis, and new leadership.

Dominance of the farmers

Ireland was different in 1880 from what it had been at the time of O'Connell's repeal movement in the 1840s. Then Ireland had been a teeming society of over 8 million people in which the predominant element had been labourers, representing some 56 per cent of the male agricultural workforce. In the second half of the nineteenth century Catholic farmers emerged as the dominant group in Ireland. They now represented 60 per cent of the male agricultural workforce. Increasingly educated and prosperous, they wanted a say in the running of their country and had the capacity to challenge for power by organising a mass political party.

Estimates of relative size of agricultural classes, 1841 and 1881

Agricultural Class	Estimated percentage of adult male agricultural labour force	
	1841	1881
Farmers and farmers's sons	42	60
Farmers: over 50 acres	9	9
Farmers: 21-50 acres	9	14
Farmers: 20 acres or less	15	17
Farmers' sons	14	20
Labourers	56	38
Labourer-landholders	30	12
Landless labourers	26	26
Others	2	3
Total number of adult males in agricultural labour forces	1,604,034	970,835

Ultramontane Roman Catholicism

In addition, the Roman Catholic Church was more powerfully organised and united by the 1870s. In pre-famine days, the Church was still in the process of recovering from the disruption of the penal era. The process of reform had made some progress in the eastern counties before the famine, but in other parts of Ireland the organisation of the church had an almost Presbyterian aspect. After the famine, under the influence of the ultramontane Cardinal Paul Cullen, then Archbishop of Dublin, the Church had become more centralised and much more self-confident. As its priests were largely drawn from the farmer class, the church and the farmers shared common values.

New sense of identity

The result was that priests and people were able to establish a sense of national identity, which extolled the virtues of Catholic and peasant Ireland and emphasised the differences between England and Ireland. *Urban, industrial and Protestant England were the antithesis of holy, Catholic and rural Ireland.* An Irish government in Dublin would thus not only mean more effective government but would also preserve Irish values excluding corrupting influences from England.

Literary revivals

This vision was later re-enforced by the Irish literary revivals, both Anglo-Irish and Gaelic, of the late nineteenth century. The Gaelic Athletic Association (1884) sought to revive Irish games and the Gaelic League (1893) sought to restore the Irish language and . Together with the Anglo-Irish literary revival they also sought in Ireland the kind of dignity and the health that the industrialised world had lost.

William Butler Yeats

The creator of the master-images of this mythology was William Butler Yeats. His rural Ireland was populated by peasants or servants, endlessly telling stories about the exploits of fairies, goblins and elves. Peasant communities were the custodians of human culture and its enduring principles, whilst urban culture was artificial and fleeting. According to Yeats,

Folk-art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and pretty as certainly as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered into itself the simplest and most unforgettable thoughts of the generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan

Yeats's play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, became a central political text for those determined to overthrow English rule in Ireland. The setting of the play is 1798 in County Mayo, at the moment of the arrival of the French revolutionary army in support of the rebellion of the United Irishmen. An old woman persuades a young man to forgo marriage and achieve a greater destiny by fighting for his country. On leaving the house, she is reported to have been transformed from an old hag into a young queen, thereby revealing her identity as the spirit of Ireland rejuvenated by heroic sacrifice.

6. Why Did the Challenge to the Union Occur?

II. Agrarian Depression

The onset of agrarian depression, beginning in 1877, provided a powerful motive for mobilising and challenging for power. Owing to a combination of inclement weather and foreign competition, crops failed and agricultural prices plummeted in the late 1870s. Particularly serious in the west of Ireland was the poor potato crop which accounted for over 60 per cent of the £14m fall in the value of the Irish tillage produce between 1876 and 1879. The prices of certain key products fell well below the levels of 1876 - butter down 27 per cent and cattle prices down 25 per cent.

A revolution of despair or rising expectations?

Such a collapse of prices after a period of prosperity has led some commentators to see the land league crisis not as a revolution of despair, but as a revolution of rising expectations. Rising standards, as seen in a more varied diet, improved housing, increased savings and higher levels of school attendance, were interrupted and threatened by the crisis of the late 1870s.

In fact, in this view, the great agitation which began in Ireland in 1879 conformed, at least in part, to the pattern of many other revolutions. When hard times suddenly replace an era of prosperity, enormous tensions and frustrations can build up within society, as economic adversity threatens to erode or even obliterate the material gains of a preceding period of substantial economic advance. People rebelled not because they were ground down in poverty, but because they wanted to maintain rising standards of living.

Why attack landlords?

This is why the Land League agitation was directed against landlords. The quickest way to maintain standards was to reduce the rent paid to landlords.

7. Why Did the Challenge to the Union Occur?

III. Leadership

The third factor helping to explain the timing and strength of the challenge to the Union was the leadership provided by Charles Stewart Parnell.

Weaknesses

Now Parnell did have his weaknesses. He was in no way a political thinker and brought about his own downfall through his self-indulgent affair with Kitty O'Shea.

Qualities of leadership

Nevertheless, Parnell had the leadership qualities to hold the nationalist movement together in Ireland: his authoritative appearance and the sensitivity of his political antennae. He was able to keep the often warring factions in the home rule movement together, for example, the Fenians on the one hand and the Roman Catholic church on the other. He also seemed to know just how far to go in making demands.

Standing in Britain

In addition, as an Anglo-Irishman, he was able to give the home rule movement credibility in Britain and not allow himself to be overawed or intimidated by the aristocratic atmosphere of Westminster. For example, he made a deep impression on Gladstone who once said,

I cannot tell you how much I think about him, and what an interest I take in everything concerning him. A marvellous man, a terrible fall.

So the home rule movement emerged when it did as the result not of one factor, by the co-incidence of a number of factors - changes in Irish society; the onset of agrarian crisis; and the advent of new political leadership.

Threats to home rule

The home rule movement was almost destroyed by the split following the O'Shea divorce in 1890, and was weakened by the Conservative and Unionist policy of 'killing home rule by kindness' after 1886. Nevertheless, it survived to keep the question of home rule on the political agenda.

8. Why Did Gladstone Concede?

The answer to the question why Gladstone gave way to the demand for home rule and introduced his first home rule bill in 1886 depends very much on an assessment of Gladstone's character and personality.

Political expediency?

The more cynical observe that by 1886 Gladstone needed the votes of Parnell and his colleagues to keep in office. The home rulers held the balance of power between the liberals and the conservatives in parliament.

This cynical view is not supported by the evidence. The evidence shows that Gladstone had decided that home rule was necessary as early as September 1885. Until then, he had been a firm supporter of the Union and had been willing to support it with a series of coercion acts which suspended the normal liberties of the subject.

Irish experiences

What made Gladstone change his mind about the Union was his previous experience in dealing with Ireland. Gladstone was committed to the rule of law and to democratic government and by 1885 he did not believe that it was possible for Westminster to govern Ireland under the ordinary rule of law.

Gladstone's 1880-85 ministry and Ireland

He had come to this belief because of the experience of his 1880-85 ministry in Ireland. It had been a bitter experience with soaring crime rates in Ireland, a succession of coercion 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 cold 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 cold Kilmainham Jail.’
So Buchshot [Foster, the Chief Secretary] took the warrant and buttoned up his coat
And took the train to Holyhead to catch the Kingstown boat.

Rule of law stripped of ‘foreign garb’

It was an experience that Gladstone was not willing to repeat and he thought that only by allowing Irish people to make their own laws that the normal rule of law could 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.

The Union lost

And this, perhaps, is the key to understanding the loss of Ireland, or part of it, by the United Kingdom. The new Catholic, democratic Ireland convinced a sufficient number of people in the rest of the United Kingdom that, at root, the Union was unfair. Admittedly, Gladstone’s first home rule bill failed in the Commons and home rule was not restored to Ireland until the early 1920s, after there had been two more home rule bills, the Ulster crisis in 1911-14, the Easter rising of 1916, and the Anglo-Irish war of 1919-21. Nevertheless, the breakthrough had been made in 1886, when Gladstone committed a major British party to home rule. After then, it was just a matter of time, whatever Unionists in Britain or Ireland, said.

Appendix A

Unionist Opposition to Home Rule in Ireland

The demand for home rule did not go unchallenged in Ireland. A counter movement, an Irish unionist movement, emerged among Protestants and among the landed ascendancy, demanding that the Union between Britain and Ireland should be maintained. At first, in 1885-86, an attempt was made to maintain a united unionist front in Ireland. However, unionists in the province of Ulster (Ulster unionists) and those in the other three provinces (Southern unionists) went their separate ways.

Irish Protestants

By and large Irish unionists were Protestants - members of the Church of Ireland, Presbyterians and Methodists - who made up a quarter of the population of Ireland. These Irish Protestants were a small and scattered minority in most of Ireland, comprising some 10 per cent of the population in the three southern provinces of Leinster, Munster and Connaught. In the northern province of Ulster, however, Protestants were in a majority. They comprised 57 per cent of the province as a whole, but in the six north-eastern counties (Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone) they were in a larger majority, with some 66 per cent of the population. Presbyterians were the largest single Protestant denomination.

What did Irish unionists want?

Irish unionists wanted to maintain intact the Union between Great Britain and Ireland. They wanted the whole of Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. This simple fact is often forgotten in the light of subsequent events. Because of the special treatment given to most Ulster unionists when a Dublin parliament was restored in 1920-21, it is often assumed that the Ulster unionist campaign against home rule had been successful. In fact, Ulster unionists failed to prevent the break-up of the United Kingdom and had themselves to accept a form of home rule themselves. Partition was very much a compromise and a betrayal of unionists in the rest of Ulster and of the other three provinces.

Why did Irish unionists want to maintain the Union?

Satisfaction with the status quo

All Irish unionists wanted to maintain the union for two reasons. In the first place, they were content with things as they were. They denied the nationalist claim that British rule was harmful to Ireland and argued instead that Ireland had prospered

under the union. Protestants in Ulster were particularly insistent that their province had done well out of the British connection, and even went so far as to maintain that English and Scottish intervention had turned Ulster from being a 'sink of murder, misery and vice' into a land of 'smiling prosperity'. As the Belfast Chamber of Commerce told 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 a progress second to none ... Why should we be driven by force to abandon the conditions that led to that success?

Apprehensions of nationalism

A second reason for opposing home rule was that Irish Protestants thought that they would be unfairly treated, even persecuted, in a home rule Ireland. An Irish parliament would be dominated by nationalists, by agriculturalists and Catholics and would put a swift end to Protestants ascendancy and prosperity. Indeed, many, especially among Ulster Protestants, believed that Home Rule meant Rome Rule, and I think it is impossible to exaggerate the significance of Ulster Protestant fear of what they saw as the all-pervading power and influence of the Roman Catholic Church.

Ulster unionism

Whereas the Southern unionists are now forgotten, Ulster unionism remains a powerful political force. It does so because it represents a remarkable alliance which cuts across all social classes and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was powerfully directed by such organisations as the Ulster Loyalist Anti-Repeal Union (1885-86), the Ulster Convention League (1892) and the Ulster Unionist Council (1905-5). Landowners, tenant farmers, and agricultural labourers, businessmen and skilled and unskilled industrial workers, all combined in a remarkable unionist front.

Their strength was reflected in election results. Generally, while the Irish Parliamentary Party won some 85 of Ireland's 103 parliamentary seats between 1886 and 1914, Ulster Unionists won 16 or 17 of Ulster's 33 seats. By contrast, the Southern unionists could win at most only three of the remaining 70 seats in the other three provinces.

Appendix B

Unionist Opposition to Home Rule in Britain

In their resistance of home rule, Irish unionists enjoyed the support of the Conservative and Unionist Party in Great Britain. This had been the case since 1886 and it is often thought that Ulster Unionist resistance to home rule was stirred up by British Conservatives and Unionists for party political reasons. This was not the case. Ulster Unionists were organising before they were taken up by British Conservatives and Unionist.

The British Conservative and Unionist opposition to home rule was just as much a mixture of principle and expediency as was the Liberal commitment of home rule.

Unionist principles

Integrity of the United Kingdom and British Empire

As for principle, the overriding concern was the maintenance of the integrity of the United Kingdom and the British Empire. It was feared that if home rule were conceded to Ireland, at the very centre of the Empire, then this would lead other parts of the Empire demanding self-government. The concession of home rule would be interpreted as a sign of weakness and would have a domino effect and would encourage nationalist revolts leading to the loss of all British overseas possessions, including India, the most glittering jewel of the British Empire.

Moreover, it was argued that the union had worked for Ireland and that there was no reason for separation, especially when developments in communication brought Ireland closer to Great Britain.

Minority rights

As the debate over home rule wore on, a further principle was insisted upon, namely the rights of minorities in a parliamentary democracy. It was held that the Irish unionist minority in Ireland had just as much right to protection and self-determination as did the Irish nationalist majority and should not be forced out of the United Kingdom against their will.

Political calculation

These altruistic motives were underpinned by baser political calculations which encouraged British unionists to be so insistent upon opposing home rule and

maintaining the union.

Exploiting prejudices

In the first place, such opposition was popular among the British electorate, who generally had little sympathy for Irish nationalist agitation. Anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudices were much stronger than Liberal principles, and Unionist leaders were well aware of the value of the 'Orange Card'.

Needing the Irish unionists

Secondly, the Conservative and Unionist party in Great Britain increasingly needed the Irish unionists. It was not simply that the British party had intimate family connections with the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. Rather it became increasingly politically dependent upon Irish Unionists to give them an issue, the union, around which to rally an increasingly divided party and also to provide an electoral machine in Great Britain, for one of the great strengths of the Irish Unionist movement was its well-organised campaign in Great Britain.