

# Interpretations of home rule

Taken from 'Home rule and the historians' by Alan O'Day, *The making of modern Irish history. Revisionism & the revisionist controversy*, Routledge, 0-41512-171-X. pp 141-62

The numerous studies of home rule can be placed in four broad schools: unionist, liberal, nationalist and modern revisionist. The unionist view lost ground in after 1920 after which the liberal and nationalist perspectives dominated. Interpretations are influenced by the authors' personal predilection, purpose for writing, academic training and use of different research methods, and the circumstances at the time of writing.

## 1. Unionist

Between 1886 and 1914 unionist literature, mainly polemical writings, was rich in numbers, argument and emotion. The main theme was Ireland's unsuitability for self-government. The historian W. H. Lecky threw on the scales the weight of his acknowledged expertise of eighteenth-century Ireland to counter the claims of Nationalists. With the settlement of 1920-21 there was little interest in such interpretations.



Anti-home rule postcard, c. 1912

## 2. Liberal

John Morley's classic biography of Gladstone, initially published in 1903, was a powerful salvo for Home Rule. A political colleague of Gladstone, a politician-journalist staking out a position, he was not a dispassionate scholar intent upon weighing

up and balancing evidence before pronouncing judgement. The biography's purpose was to bring Liberals back to their true mission. Gladstone's adoption of Home Rule in 1886 was not just an Irish crusade but a stand for the liberal humanitarian commitment to justice. He strove to show that Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule was not a response to freak parliamentary arithmetic or the whim of an 'old man in a hurry'. According to Morley 'few are the heroic moments in our parliamentary politics, but this was one'

Morley influenced studies in the 1930s by George Dangerfield, J.L. Hammond and Nicholas Mansergh. They reaffirmed and extended his perspective advocating the view that Home Rule was the best solution we never had. Unionists were for them and others the 'guilty men' of the Irish imbroglio. No-one slapped down unionists more thoroughly than Dangerfield. *His The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935) sees them as among the chief villains in the destruction of the liberal values of later Victorian and Edwardian Britain. They had been obstructionists over Ireland and bore responsibility as wreckers of Liberal Britain. In a real sense, they were forerunners of the inter-war menace of fascism and intolerance. Dangerfield's subsequent foray into Irish affairs, *The Damnable Question* (1977), published in his later years, repeats his early opinions and argues forcefully against any Liberal concession to Ulster separatism.

Hammond belonged to the progressive left in British politics. He had spent time in Ireland reporting for *The Manchester Guardian* on the Anglo-Irish war. His newspaper was then the leading voice of Liberalism and a critic of British actions in Ireland. Hammond was appalled by the atrocities committed, especially at the hands of the crown forces, and saw in Gladstone's Home Rule proposals the best means to have averted the tragedy he witnessed. Emotion bubbled to the surface in Hammond's declaration in his magnum opus, *Gladstone and the Irish Nation* (1938) that, 'on the day of Judgement the British people may be glad to remember that in 1886 nearly half the nation and in 1893 more than half the nation was ready to follow this old man's summons to a splendid adventure'. Due to the timing of the book's publication, it had only a modest impact until after 1945 when it became indispensable to the rising generation of history students.

Mansergh shared Hammond's outlook. As a southern Irish Protestant he felt the bloody last chapter of the Home Rule episode with special poignancy. In Ireland in the *Age of Reform and Revolution* (1940), he maintains that in the long

unhappy history of Anglo-Irish relations only one event is more truly tragic than the rejection of Home Rule in 1886. The opportunity of settlement had come, perhaps the greatest of English statesmen was ready to grasp it and yet the unique chance was destroyed by a failure in perception whose consequences not even time can wholly repair. Mansergh's account was among the earliest by a respected academic rather than the labour of a journalist or politician though his passionate eloquence was not dulled thereby. Common threads running through liberal interpretations include Gladstone's grand vision, the possibility of Home Rule ending 'centuries' of Anglo-Irish antagonism, and a disinclination to place the successive schemes under close scrutiny.

### 3. Nationalist

Nationalist writings offered a variant on the liberal perspective. These flowered particularly in the post-1922 Irish Republic but built on earlier the skilful works of R. Barry O'Brien, an indefatigable journalist-historian.

He was a participant as well as an observer having been Parnell's Boswell during the last campaign of 1890-91 'His the magnificent two-volume study of Parnell published in 1898, like Morley's *Life*, is a monument to the craft of late Victorian biography.' During the period when he was preparing the biography O'Brien was cavorting with Lady Gregory's set and trying to persuade the Unionist, Sir Horace Plunkett, to take up Parnell's mantle. The biography was a conscious comparison of the greatness of Parnell's era with the sad fate of Irish politics in the 1890s. O'Brien's emotions burst through when he declaimed that Parnell had 'brought Ireland within sight of the Promised Land. The triumph of the national cause awaits other times, and another man.' O'Brien did not repudiate the importance or greatness of Gladstone but put emphasis on Parnell's power, strategic insight and magnetism. His centre of gravity was Irish.

However, the post-1922 generation of historians in Ireland writing in the Nationalist tradition was little interested in home rule. They were fascinated by the revolutionary politics which had delivered self-government. For most of these writers Home Rule seemed a middle course that diverted some Nationalists between the Famine and Irish Revolution but never could meet Ireland's legitimate expectations. T.A. Jackson's, *Ireland Her Own*, first published in 1947 but reprinted several times, states this widely held view. Of the home rulers, only Parnell entered the new age with a reputation largely unsullied. The others were seen as Irish 'uncle Toms'.

### 4. Modern revisionists

Whereas earlier Nationalist writing sought to legitimise the revolutionary tradition, to salute its accomplishments, later scholars were drawn to the same subject matter in order to quash the prevailing republican orthodoxy. The new or research-driven history that mushroomed after the Second World War has been mainly university based. The majority of earlier writings were by contemporaries, politicians and journalists. Mainstays of the academic approach can be summarised as careful sifting of evidence, fidelity to information, balance and a professed refusal to employ history as a handmaiden to politics.

F.S.L. Lyons captured the essence of academic professionalism when he explained, 'I have a historian's loyalty to my sources and, once having seen this material would find it impossible to behave as if it didn't exist. . . . A public man belongs in the last analysis to history and the ordinary rules of privacy don't apply - or at least not in the way that they do to private people.' This approach did not originate in Ireland but was transported there by scholars who in the 1930s had been research students in Britain, principally at the Institute of Historical Research in the University of London. Nor was it even a British Isles innovation for the real beginning point of academic inquiry had been in nineteenth-century German universities from whence it jumped over the sea to America before being transported from there into Britain.

#### Refining the nationalist view

One of centres of academic interest in Home Rule in Ireland was Trinity College. Although the Trinity group turned a cool eye on traditional republican interpretations, their work has not greatly departed from the liberal-nationalist perspective. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (1971) reflects the continued potency of those traditions. He begins:

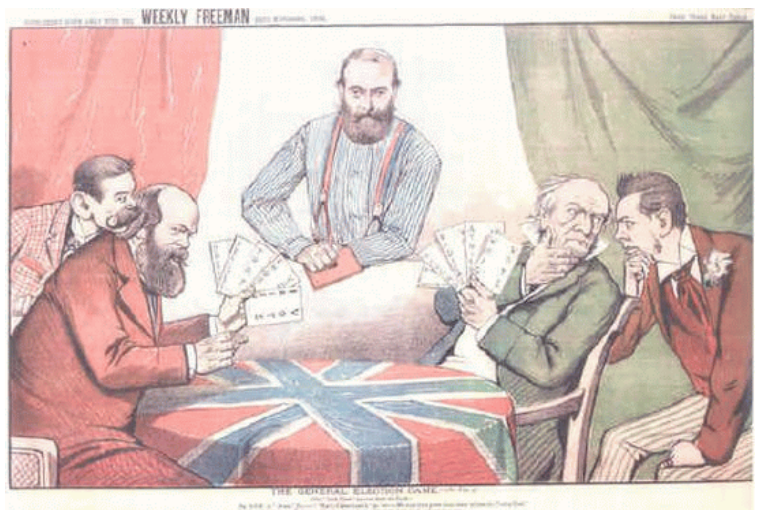
the tired old witticism that every time the English came within sight of solving the Irish question the Irish changed the question, contains, like most jokes about Ireland, a small grain of truth submerged in a vast sea of misconception. The Irish did not change the question between the Famine and the war of independence any more than they had changed it between the Union and the Famine. The 'national demand', as it used to be called, remained in essence what Wolfe Tone had declared it to be as long ago as 1791, 'to break the connection with

England, the never-failing source of all our political evils'. It is true, of course, that men differed in the nineteenth century, as they have continued to differ, in the twentieth, about how complete the break should be, or more precisely, perhaps, about how far the full separatist idea was practicable. But whether they took their stand on the rock of the republic, or were prepared to settle for repeal of the Union and some form of Home Rule based upon a reanimated Irish Parliament, they were emphatic that the first step towards real independence was to recover for Irishmen the right to control their own affairs

Lyons' last major study, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890-1939* (1979) is written within the Nationalist perspective while identifying reasons for its failure. This volume was composed under the impact of the violence in Northern Ireland and undoubtedly is sombre in tone. It is seen as a signal piece of 'revisionism' by 'anti-revisionists', mainly because Lyons identifies four antagonist cultures in Ireland which divide rather than unite the country's peoples, in one sense supporting the two nations theory so much hated by traditional Nationalists. Nevertheless, there is little directly in the account that can be called demonstrably anti-national. Despite his credentials as an authority on the Home Rule movement, Lyons does not fully flesh out an implicit part of his theme that in the halcyon days of Parnell, Nationalism had not been Celtic, Catholic and sectarian, the roots of partition being found in the post-1890 changes in the nature of the movement.

'High politics': Turning home rule historiography on its head

Differing academic outlooks were largely a product of training and fashions in historiography elsewhere, mainly in British universities. Michael Hurst, an Oxford scholar, published a careful study, *Joseph Chamberlain and the Liberal Reunion: The Round Table Conference 1887* (1967), establishing a framework of analysis based on intensive use of private correspondence and adherence to strict chronology. Hurst argues that the issue was used by most of the participants as a means to solidify their respective standings with supporters and reunion was not what they actually wanted to achieve. Implicit in this argument is the assumption that issues and ideology must not be accepted at face value but may very well stand as codes or publicly acceptable objectives behind which a more complex agenda can be found.



The 'Irish card' in the 1885-86 general elections

Hurst's insight was replicated and extended in other studies of British politics, such as D.A. Hamer's biography, *John Morley: Liberal Intellectual in Politics* (1968). Hamer, a New Zealander who did research at Oxford, asserts that the Liberal party leadership was internally divided between advocates of programme politics and those who favoured concentration on a single great unifying cause. Hamer subsequently elaborated this theme suggesting that Gladstone's motivation for the adoption of home rule was less idealistic than the liberal interpretation admitted. After exhaustive investigation of original and published sources Hamer concludes that, while Gladstone no doubt believed in his panacea for resolving Irish disaffection, home rule was devised essentially for internal Liberal party needs. He maintains, 'the Home Rule preoccupation offered a temporary remedy for faddism, a temporary answer to the problem that had plagued the Liberal leaders for many years of fixing priorities among reform demands'.

This assertion turned Home Rule historiography on its head. Gladstone was neither an 'old man in a hurry' nor pandering to Irish susceptibilities. He was, rather, a cool calculating leader intent upon patching up dissension within the Liberal party by using Ireland as the common denominator, the all-embracing cause.

An influential increment in the interpretation was introduced in the many works of A.B. Cooke and J.R. Vincent, culminating in *The Governing Passion* (1974). They asserted that only private materials are reliable for assessing motivation, thereby rejecting the usual reliance upon public as well as private pronouncements. For them

the 'Irish question' was the temporary and particular name given in the 1880s to a continuous and permanent existential problem which party managers inflict upon themselves. This is the task of finding party lines,

divisions, and alignments, and then rationalising these for the benefit of that great majority of even their senior colleagues who hold themselves bound by habit, honour, loyalty, and decency to an existentialist view of party definitions of which they then loyally expect the moral entrepreneurs of the party to evolve for them from their own inner Nihilism.

Behind their thesis lies the belief that the 'greasy pole' of politics was a contest for power between individuals in which issues and principles have only a subsidiary role. This took Hurst's essential proposition and added a large twist of cynicism to it. Cooke and Vincent contend that Gladstone took up home rule as a tactic to out-manoeuvre Joseph Chamberlain and other rivals within the Liberal party. This approach, often referred to as 'high politics' was employed in Maurice Cowling's study of the Reform Act of 1867. It has been associated especially with Peterhouse, Cambridge and has been applied to other disputes by scholars from many backgrounds. The main features of 'high politics' are that it developed outside Ireland and was initially used for questions unrelated to Irish affairs, only latterly being applied to Home Rule.

For practitioners of 'high politics' Westminster is the centre of the political matrix, the venue where all vital alignments and issues are worked out. Also, the technique is employed essentially to explain British leaders' motivations and ignores nationalists. 'High politics' is often alleged to be 'conservative' as a consequence of the political stance of some of its originators, also because it de-emphasises ideas and issues and correspondingly stresses personal ambition and the quest for power. Few would suggest, however, that this sort of 'conservatism' was akin to the Unionist writings of an earlier generation. What this whole school or approach potentially spells out for discussions of Home Rule is that the scheme devised in 1886 contains much more than a means of satisfying Irish wants, that home rule has had a variety of uses both within and outside Ireland, and that the term Home Rule contained symbols and meanings beyond being a formal description of a form of self-government.

### **Revisionist debate & home rule**

'Revisionism' as it is understood or vilified in Ireland - reinterpretation of the patriotic past with the intent of undermining the nationalist and revolutionary tradition, has not scarred the debate on home rule to any great degree. New perspectives on Home Rule have not had the same emotive force as, for instance, those on the Famine, land war, or Easter Rising. The struggle for Home Rule is seen as more complex, more variegated, less inspired by single-minded nobility of purpose than these earlier writers allowed but studies have not been lacking in that empathy which anti-revisionists seem as essential to a proper understanding of Irish history. 'High Politics' did spark a controversy, but it mainly took place within British academic circles. Nothing in 'high politics' is inherently anti-national and its findings, in fact, can be used to sustain an orthodox Nationalist interpretation.