

Why are there so many interpretations of Parnell?

Taken from Roy Foster's 'Interpretations of Parnell: the importance of locale' & 'Parnell & his people. The ascendancy & home rule' in his *Paddy & Mr Punch. Connections in Irish & English history*, Penguin, 0-14017-170-3, pp 40-75

Enigma of Parnell

Interpretations of Parnell are governed by the paucity, and often contradictory nature, of evidence, the needs of the interpreter and the climate of the times as by the charismatic central figure himself.

What is undeniable is the achievement of converting one of the British parties of government to accepting autonomy for Ireland. For this Parnell must take the credit. This is vividly illustrated in Gladstone's interview with Parnell's first biographer shortly before his death. Then the retired Prime Minister reiterated that the Union of Great Britain and Ireland had no moral force. Consciously or unconsciously, he was repeating word for word the phrase employed by Parnell in a speech at Wexford sixteen eventful years before: the speech for which Gladstone then had Parnell consigned to Kilmainham.



Parnell, with the Land League and Kilmainham jail in the past, and two and a half years before the Home Rule Bill. 'Where he was going was always more interesting than where he had got to.'

Notwithstanding this obvious achievement, recent interpretations of Parnell have reassessed issues like his commitment to land reform, the practicability of Home Rule as drafted, and his relations to Fenianism - often in the light of current preoccupations.

A failed psychoanalytical approach

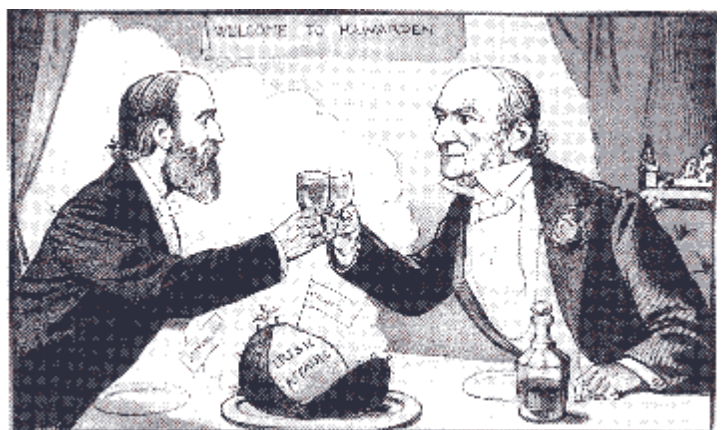
In 1922 the pioneer psychoanalyst and Freudian disciple Ernest Jones delivered a paper entitled 'The Island of Ireland: A Psychoanalytical Contribution to Political Psychology'. A year after the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Jones was impelled to consider Ireland's severance from Britain and not unexpectedly, he dealt with the notion of Ireland as animating mother-figure. Most of all, he concentrated upon that enigmatic nationalist, Charles Stewart Parnell. Jones demonstrated the importance to Parnell's development of the police raid on his mother's house in the 1860s. Seeking Fenians, the police penetrated her bedroom; they then took away a sword belonging to Charles. Symbolic violation of the mother and castration of the son, Jones concluded triumphantly, focused Parnell's implacable Oedipal hatred upon the British government and helped change Irish history.

Unfortunately for Jones's theory, this incident is probably apocryphal, and certainly exaggerated, but his essay takes its place in a long tradition of attempts to decode the motivation behind Parnell.

Orthodox interpretation

Parnell haunts his biographers, much as he haunts the memoirs of his contemporaries. As his ageing lieutenants like William O'Brien, T.P. O'Connor, T.M. Healy and Michael Davitt wrote their autobiographies in the decades after his death, the baleful eye of the dead Chief seemed to look over their shoulders; he remains oddly distanced from their accounts of the great struggle they had lived through together.

Barry O'Brien, in his two-volume biography of 1898, was one celebrated exception and established the orthodox interpretation. Horgan, reviewing his achievement, said that O'Brien had 'many of the characteristics of Boswell', which may have been intended as a rather backhanded compliment. But O'Brien's belief, for instance, that Parnell's mother inculcated the anti-British feelings in her children was



In the days of the 'Union of Hearts'. Within a year they were at each other's throats.

rapidly accepted, despite a scornful rebuttal from Parnell's sister Anna, who might be supposed to know. Other interpretations of the Parnell enigma were firmly engraved by O'Brien. He was an aristocratic rebel who took up nationalism like Fitzgerald, Tone and Emmet, turning his back on class, caste and fortune. He solved the land question in 1882. The O'Sheas had little intrinsic importance in his life until the bombshell of 1890. He was all-powerful until his fall. Home Rule was the great missed chance of Irish history.

There were some contradictory noises early on. Anti-Parnellites, including T.M. Healy, Frank Hugh O'Donnell and Jasper Tully, claimed that Parnell was a cardboard figure: the creature of the men around him. These never gained sufficient currency to undermine the orthodox view.

Difficulties of challenging the orthodoxy

Shortage of evidence

Parnell left few papers. His sister, Anna, attacked the Land League as a 'Great Sham', never prepared to go the length of its rhetoric, which sold the smaller tenantry down the river; but her account remained buried for decades in a long-lost manuscript. Others, who could have told a great deal; remained silent - like Parnell's secretary, Henry Campbell, generally discreet to the point of invisibility. (Where he did reveal himself, as in his libel suit against the *Cork Herald* in June 1891, he showed, that he knew a great deal.) And the enigma remained fuelled by uncertainty - about everything from the circumstances of Parnell's childhood to the cause of his fatal illness and even the whereabouts of his body after his death.' (Giving a lecture in Waterford in the early 1970, I [Roy Foster] was told categorically from the audience, 'Parnell was never in that box!')

Parnell's reticence

Moreover, finding the Chief's opinions on almost any question is nearly as elusive an undertaking. His own resolute anti-intellectualism has something to do with this, and his refusal to engage in analysis or even arrive at an intellectually argued position, at least in public. His thought processes, unlike those of his garrulous lieutenants, are shrouded in silence. T.P. O'Connor expressed their bemusement at this: 'It is one of the strongest and most curious peculiarities of Mr Parnell not merely that he rarely, if ever, speaks of himself but that he rarely, if ever, gives any indication of having studied himself . . . It is a joke among his intimates that to Mr Parnell the being Parnell does not exist.' It is difficult to form an intellectual profile of him, or even to try and imagine his mental world; his ideology seems to have been as instinctual as his politics.

His sense of humour

Parnell carefully preserved the theatrical apartness of his manner towards most people, even on occasion members of his family. He treated many of his political associates as if they were troublesome tenants; they for their part sometimes spoke of him as if he were their eccentric landlord. In an effort to describe him, so many images and comparisons have been employed that cataloguing them has formed the basis of at least one rather bizarre book. Perhaps Parnell's own off-beat humour deserves more analysis. Was it a joke when he remarked to his brother that he was thinking of raising another Tribute, as politics was the only thing that ever made him any money? Or when he told Davitt that his first action as President of an independent Irish government would be to lock him up? Or when he told the gushing Mary Gladstone that the greatest actor he had seen in London was her father? He liked to say the unexpected, in a deadpan way; some of his more mysterious answers at the Special Commission hearings may have been in the same vein. Like W.B. Yeats, he probably became impatient at the, reverence accorded his lightest remarks, and weary of constantly being taken seriously.

Need of interpreters

Difficulties are increased by the Irish 'fetishism' for Parnell, which 'placed him on a higher level than common humanity'. Indeed, Parnell's later career demonstrates the drawback of pantheons of national heroes, especially when their inhabitants take up premature residence before they are safely dead. The process of putting him there involved analysis and interpretation in off-the-peg biographies from very early in his career; a century after his death, it continues still. Back in 1946, the anniversary of his birth, J.J. Horgan called for a definitive biography as 'our centenary tribute to Parnell', and despite F.S.L. Lyons's attempt to fill the gap in 1974, many questions of interpretation remain.

Even in his own lifetime, the Parnell image owed much to contemporary journalists with an



interest in dramatizing politics. Accounts of strange, almost supernatural meetings became a set-piece of contemporary memoirs: William O'Brien's disguised encounter in a fog at Greenwich Observatory, Standish O'Grady's meeting on a Wicklow mountainside in a mounting storm, Lord Ribblesdale's surreal railway journey where Parnell talked intensely the whole time but never once looked at his face.

Time of writing

Interpretations are also influenced by the climate of the times. Those writing before violence broke out in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, were happy to emphasise Parnell's links with the Fenians and the revolutionary republicans who had brought about Irish independence. With the troubles, the stock of revolutionary republicanism fell sharply and historians sought to emphasise Parnell's constitutionalism and distance from the Fenians,

Possible clues

There are clues, however, in his personal background: scraps of information in his brother's patchy memoir, inferences from the Avondale library catalogue, and throw-away remarks in his oddly stilted speeches. And there is his haphazard family life, the constant absences of mother and sisters, the coolness of relations between family members, the sense of disassociation from much of Irish life.

In some ways Parnell is a classic instance of marginalized Irishness; he reflects the dislocation of his class and his caste in the late nineteenth century. It is symbolic that the few new Parnellite records to come to light over the last decade or so have to do with finances: letters extending loans or meeting overdue bills, bundles of worthless share certificates. The relative poverty of the Parnells and the hopeless position of the Avondale estate cast implicit doubts on O'Brien's picture of Parnell's background. His precarious position as a landlord was mirrored by his ambivalence about the direction of the land struggle. Michael Davitt's memoir, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (1904), pointed up the tension between the two charismatic Land League leaders on the question of land nationalization.



Katherine O'Shea. Parnell had this photograph with him in Kilmainham jail.

Mrs (O'Shea) Parnell's explosive memoir in 1914 contained even more traumatic shocks, enshrined in her late husband's love letters. 'I cannot describe to you the disgust I always felt with those [Land League] meetings, knowing as I did how hollow and wanting in solidity everything connected with the movement was. When I was arrested I did not think the movement would have survived a month, but this wretched Government have such a fashion for doing things by halves that it has managed to keep things going in several of the counties up till now.'

Land reformer who deviated into politics or a politician who deviated into land reform?

The chilly attitude towards those 'keeping it going' - in actual fact, the Ladies' Land League led by his sister Anna - is breathtaking. Parnell's conservatism on the land issue has since come into increasingly clear focus - a process begun by Davitt's memoir in 1904. The date is significant: as with O'Hara's *Chief and Tribune* in 1919, contemporary events at that time were demonstrating the limitations of the 1879-82 revolution, exposed by a new surge of radical land agitation and the application of current left-wing social theory to the Irish situation.

None the less, any interpretation of Parnell must put his ideas into the context of their own times, not ours. Lyons's judgement that as late as 1878 Parnell still saw the land question as incidental to the political struggle is open to question. Certainly, opinions and writings attributed to him at this time seem to have actually been those of his sister Fanny. But his great contribution remains the confluence of the Home Rule and the land campaigns, and the audacious political strategy that enabled him to accomplish one revolution and to advance another. Parnell's tactical genius was the necessary precondition of Gladstone's 1886 manoeuvre, where land reform and Home Rule were attempted (misguidedly) in one package.

Paul Bew, radically differing from Lyons, believes that Parnell's priority was land reform, as a strategy to lead landlords into the nationalist camp; he was certainly preoccupied by the extent to which a peasant proprietary could develop through government aid and how far this could be reconciled with the pursuit of political autonomy. In the last year of his life, when projected arrangements for Home Rule might have been expected to preoccupy him since his astounding repudiation of Gladstone's plan, he seems to have been far more obsessed with a labourious scheme

of land purchase - the fruit of ten years' thinking, or so he said. It is tempting to reverse Lyons's order of priorities and see him as a land reformer who deviated into politics, rather than the other way round.

Fenianism

What kind of politics he really espoused remains equally debatable. O'Brien believed that 'he saw as if by instinct that Fenianism was key of Irish nationality,' and that his extremist American speeches 1880s came from his heart. Others are less sure. O'Brien stressed the importance of Fenian sympathies during the 1860s among members of Parnell's family, but Anna Parnell's little-noticed testimony about Fanny's girlish poetry for the *Irish People* at this time adds a sceptical note (and characteristically provides an economic analysis):

Now, Fanny's writing for that paper had nothing to do with politics whatever. She knew nothing of the existence of the Fenians when she went to that office, and the only purpose she had was to see if she could make little money to supply some of the necessaries of life of which we were deprived. This was the only paper that would pay for poetry, though others were willing to publish it without paying. It is true that she went there very often, because it was very hard to get money out of the people at the office. She was obliged to dun them. The editor told her the objects of the Fenian and she told me, which set me wondering what obstacle there would be to the Government stopping the accomplishment of those objects, and also why the Fenians 'told everybody' that way. Her poetry had nothing to do with Ireland. The editor asked her to write something national but she tried and found she couldn't. In the autumn of '64 we got a new governess, and she found she could not study and write poetry at the same time. So she left going to the office and abandoned the attempt to get the balance of the money still owing to her.

Again, it was the polarizing conditions of the late 1870s, and the radicalization of Anna and Fanny themselves, which created a different scenario. Parnell was capable of working the Fenian interest in his first election campaigns - at a time when Butt's Home Rule party was still on trial as far as the Irish Republican Brotherhood were concerned and several figures like Patrick Egan, John O'Connor Power and J O'Kelly sustained parallel connections with the two movements. During his last campaign in 1891 Parnell rhetorically came round full circle, paying his respects to James Stephens, as he had done to John Mitchel sixteen years before. And the celebrated Gaelic Athletic Association guard of honour at his funeral apparently linked him the Phoenix flame revived. But he kept the Fenians at arm's length and the remarkable thing is how little direct connection was decisively proved between Parnell and IRB emissaries - even in the testimony of informers and enemies, during the hearings of the *Times* Special Commission.



Parnell pointing the way to his constituents after his sudden death at the age of forty-five.

Influence of contemporary circumstances

Here again, historiography reflects contemporary circumstances. When O'Brien wrote his biography of Parnell, Fenianism seemed a romantic memory. By the time the old Parnellites wrote their memoirs in the 1920s, the IRB had revived, and helped to generate an armed struggle for independence; the stock of the movement was high, and an association with it conferred national respectability.

By the 1960s and 1970s, with renewed conflict in Northern Ireland, when Lyons was publishing his books on Parnell, T.W. Moody was running his influential research seminar on the Home Rule movement at Trinity College, and Brian Farrell was organizing the lectures and papers published as *The Irish Parliamentary Tradition*, connections between constitutional and extremist agitation in Irish politics were considered more problematic, and the assertion of a viable non-violent tradition was much in people's minds. This necessarily affected interpretations of Parnell's relations to Fenianism.

Feasibility of home rule

At the same time, the actual effectiveness of Parnell's brand of constitutional politics was being queried, and not only by extreme nationalists. In 1974. A.B. Cooke's and J.R. Vincent's saturnine exposure of Gladstonian pretensions, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885-1886*, provoked impassioned historiographical debate. They claimed that the Home Rule Bill was never meant to amount to anything; possibly just a stalking horse for the land bill, it was unworkable in the real world and epitomized the opportunist and cynical approach to Home Rule of all contemporary politicians, preoccupied by short-term power struggles, not long-term

strategies. More recently, in the centenary year of the first Home Rule Bill, Alan O'Day and James Loughlin analysed the shortcomings and evasions of the Gladstone-Parnell Union of Hearts. It is certainly odd that issues such as the Irish presence at Westminster remained up in the air until such a late stage, that Ulster was effectively ignored, and that financial and economic implications stayed open questions.

Ulster unionism

In such a process, another issue inevitably comes into focus: Parnell's attitude to Ulster. How far did he realize the strength and distribution of Ulster Unionism? He certainly underestimated its populist roots, though in this he was hardly unusual. Bew's reevaluation puts Ulster at the centre of Parnell's political preoccupations towards the end of his career - imaginatively, if not always convincingly.

Certainly, at Belfast in May 1891 Parnell expressed a belated recognition that Unionism was not restricted to landlords and Dublin professional Protestants. He emphasized the need to conciliate the religious prejudices of the minority and to prove that Home Rule could accommodate a pluralist Irish identity. By then, his own hostile relations with the organization of the Catholic Church made it easier to embrace such a line, though there were more Parnellite priests than the general picture allows. In any case, at this stage the political realities of the Irish situation seemed to contradict him.

Parnell's celebrated and self-confessed ignorance of Irish history may be relevant here. He is often pictured as riding the tiger of Fenian flirtations while remaining a constitutionalist. But perhaps the real tiger, which helped consume him, was the confessional basis of Irish politics. His establishment of the National League in 1882-5, with its clerically dominated constituency organization, together with his long-standing public commitment to denominational education, probably alienated Ulster opinion as much as anything (with the exception of economic protectionism, another particular inspiration of Parnell's). Conservative and Unionist polemicists affected to see the National League as simply the Land League *redivivus* - assuming that it was O'Connellite quick-change artistry in operation again, where political organizations succeeded each other with bewildering rapidity, altering names but not underlying forms. But this was not, in fact, accurate. The National League was a new political organization, not an agrarian one. And it accepted and reinforced the divide in political and religious culture between the north-east and the rest of the island.

Getting rid of the romantic myth

If we try to rid ourselves of the romantic myth, Parnell makes a certain partial logic in various unromantic contexts: as a tenant-reform landlord fallen on hard times; as an industrialist *manqué* and closet protectionist; as a throwback to Grattanism; as a Buttite conservative who in essence continued Butt's policies; even as an American Irishman (half American himself, he was more sensitive to playing on the nuances of American opinion than many Irish orators; his brother thought that it was neither land reform nor Fenianism that awoke his interest in politics, but the American Civil War). Even his strange personal life makes sense, when he is seen as an abandoned child, emotionally immature and repressed, who became late in life utterly dependent on the mother-figure of Katharine O'Shea. Above all, there is his native locality - the nationalist history of Co. Wicklow and even Avondale itself.



The second greatest love of Parnell's life, Avondale (built 1877) near Rathdrum, Co. Wicklow, in the 'garden of Ireland'.

Parnell may have been glamorously unique, but in some ways he was originally a representative figure too. Some at least of what lay behind him involved the experience of a rationally minded gentry, putting - as they had always done - their instinct for survival first, realizing the land system would no longer support them, cautiously attempting an initiative towards devolutionary independence, strongly conscious that things had to change in order to remain the same. This strain should equally be borne in mind - and not only because it had such a formative part to play in the making of Parnell.