

Nationalist Ireland's Quest for Freedom: The Introduction of a Third Home Rule Bill in 1912

by Colleen Deeney

"We tread the land that bore us, the green flag flutters o'er us, the friends we've tried are by our side, and our hated foes before us." <1> This was the campaign song of the home rulers in 1910, and when the House of Lords surrendered its power of veto after a long and bitter struggle in 1911, advocates for home rule of Ireland seemed to have reason to rejoice in their song. The 1911 Parliament Act stated that the House of Lords could only delay a bill for 2 years, and at the end of that time the Bill would become law. This provided a beautiful bright spot in what had been for many years a gloomy situation for home rulers. The home rulers first emerged in 1874 when 59 of 105 M.P.'s elected in Ireland refused to identify themselves as either conservatives or Liberals. Instead, this group proudly adopted the goals of the man who had first used the phrase "home rule," Isaac Butt. Butt and the now officially recognized home rulers wanted to establish a Parliament in Dublin in which Irishmen could control domestic affairs while leaving imperial defense and foreign policy in the hands of British Parliament at Westminster. <2> Perhaps Britons who choked on the idea of repealing the Act of Union of 1801 would find home rule easier to swallow. However, this was not the case, and despite Butt's electoral success in 1874, he had little luck in converting either of the major parties to his program. Nevertheless, the seed of Irish nationalism had been planted, and it proceeded to grow in strength, determination, and support. Years later in 1886, Prime Minister William Gladstone introduced a Home Rule Bill for Ireland into Parliament. It was soundly defeated by a decisive vote of 343-313. A second Home Rule Bill was presented in 1892 by a then eighty-two year old Gladstone, and this time it passed the House of Commons. After a brief and electric debate in the House of Lords, however, the Bill was rejected by a vote of 419 to 41. <3> In the face of such frustrations, Irish nationalists eagerly seized the opportunity provided by the 1911 Parliament Act, and the Home Rule Bill for Ireland was placed before Parliament for a third time in April of 1912. In January of 1913, two weeks after the bill was approved in the House of Commons, it met its expected defeat in the House of Lords. Now, it was only a short two year interval before the Bill could become law.

The Home Rule Bill of 1912 called for an Irish Parliament consisting of a nominated senate and an elected lower house, and this Parliament was given general powers to legislate for the "peace, order, and good government of Ireland" with the exception of certain excluded subjects: matters concerning the crown, peace or war, the armed forces, treaties and foreign trade, defense, and now (in contrast to the 1893 bill) land purchase, national insurance, and old age pensions. <4> Such a measure would partially undo the Act of Union of 1801, which had formed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and had created a multi-ethnic core to the British Empire, combining the kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland under one Crown and Parliament. <5> The representation of Ireland at Westminster in 1801 was half of what it should have been on the basis of relative population, and ultimately, it was not to be expected that Irish opinion could influence the running of this form of government. <6> Although the Home

Rule Bill was a modest measure of self-government, most Irish nationalists saw it as the goal of all their hopes. For them, it was a final settlement of the long-standing dispute between Great Britain and Ireland. As William Redmond, brother of the future leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, put it:

Thirty years have seen the grievances of Ireland removed one by one, and today sees the representatives of Ireland in the face of the outstretched hand of friendship from Great Britain no longer bitter, but ready and willing on the basis of the Home Rule Bill to enter the future on terms of friendship and goodwill for all time with the people of England, Scotland, and Wales, and the whole Empire. <7>

However, not all in Ireland were pleased with the new progress of the Home Rule Bill. Unionists, especially those in Ulster, were for the continued union of Ireland with the United Kingdom, and they were fiercely determined to resist Home Rule.

Although most Irish nationalists did not want to completely sever ties with Great Britain, the language of home rulers in Ireland itself was often extreme, sounding anti-English and even separatist intone. The vast majority of Irish unionists lived in northern Ireland and were of Protestant descent, while Irish nationalists tended to be Catholic residents of southern Ireland. Thus, Irish unionists feared that a consequence of home rule would be the creation of a Catholic ascendancy which would surely threaten their civil and religious freedom. The unionists would not stand for that, and they prepared for the dangerous escalation of a thirty-year old problem.

In 1912, the Ulster Unionists set out to frustrate home rule and prevent it from ever being applied anywhere in Ireland. The Irish unionist leader who headed their great struggle was Sir Edward Carson. Carson stood for a broader Irish Unionist tradition, for he wanted to save all of Ireland for the Union. Carson's Unionism held that Ireland separate from Britain would inevitably sink into political and economic ruin. His background and outlook were those of the Protestant professional class of Dublin, and although he wanted to save all of Ireland for the union, he was realistic, and he knew that he may have to compromise his Unionism if any part of Ireland was to be saved from home rule. The unyielding determination of Irish nationalists would make sure of that and thanks to the Parliament Act of 1911, the Home Rule Bill now had an excellent chance of being passed. Thus, it would be quite difficult to prevent home rule from being implemented in Ireland. Carson and his fellow Unionists would never surrender their goals, however, and the part of Ireland most likely to be saved was Unionist Ulster, where Irish demand for the continued union with Great Britain was by far the strongest. <8>

Carson's partner during these dangerous and tumultuous times was James Craig. Craig stood for a more narrowly focused and localized Ulster Unionist resistance. He cared nothing for any other part of Ireland. Carson and Craig were joined in their leadership by Andrew Bonar Law from the British Unionist side. <9> This political combination of leadership guided a fierce unionist resistance to the gloomy and much dreaded prospect of home rule for Ireland.

Carson truly hoped and believed that the threat of Home Rule would not become a reality. Perhaps he tried to find some comfort in his belief that the Liberal government and its fiery leader John Redmond were bluffing when they threatened to impose home rule on Ireland against the resistance of the Ulster Unionists. Carson surely did not want to lead sectarian riots, mob violence, or even military resistance to British soldiers. However, Redmond and the Liberals seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Carson; that Ulster Unionists were bluffing when they bragged of their determination to resist home rule by any means necessary, even by force of arms. <10> Redmond and the home rule party believed that "Ireland was a seamless garment that could not be rent by any recognition of claims of any special group," and further still, "There were no special Irishmen, only Irishmen (though some may be more Irish than others)." <11> Such a situation would surely lead to a terrific clash between such intensely loyal and committed groups.

To prepare for their uncertain future and develop a feasible means of resistance to home rule, Unionists in Ulster moved to place themselves on military footing and founded a disciplined people's army. In January of 1912, some Unionists began to openly drill and train, and no more than a year later, the Ulster Unionist Council announced "that the time had come to unite volunteers into one military force." <12> *The Times* reflected this shift from a mere political battle to a resistance developing more along military lines. A report issued on August 25, 1913 explained:

The coming tour of Sir Edward Carson in Ulster will not be so much a series of political meetings for the purpose of making speeches as a series of inspections of the Ulster Volunteer Corps, which will reveal the determination of Ulster Unionists to use all Measures, even force if necessary, to prevent the authority of a Dublin Parliament being forced upon them. It is felt in Ulster that the time for speech making is past and the time for action has arrived. <13>

Thus, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was founded, with a network of regiments and battalions headquarters staff and supporting units. According to Craig, the purpose of the UVF was to give discipline and order to a unionism that otherwise could easily degenerate into sectarian gangs. In fact, all Ulster men who supported the union with Great Britain were heartily urged to join the UVF. A rather compelling advertisement in *The Times* provided evidence of this call to arms. Colonel Robert Wallace, secretary of the provincial Grand Orange Lodge of Ulster, stated that Sir Edward Carson "urges all brethren who are eligible and have not yet joined to do so at once and enroll in the Volunteer company nearest to their residence." Carson was quoted as saying "My request is that all our men should join the Ulster Volunteers. The older men can help to guard their homes and property, and thus release the younger for whatever work maybe necessary." The advertisement ends with Col. Wallace making a passionate plea: "Remember, the Ulster Volunteers are loyalists who have signed the Covenant. It does not matter if they are of our order or not. We have all got to stand together and fight together, if necessary." <14>

The Covenant Col. Wallace spoke of was the "Solemn League and Covenant," which thousands of Ulster Unionists signed on September 28, 1912. Doing so pledged oneself to resist "by any means necessary" the imposition of home rule. <15> As *The Times* reported in late August of 1913, large numbers of Unionists who had signed the Ulster Covenant during the previous year were joining the Ulster Volunteer Force. Volunteers were not only being recruited from Belfast, the Ulster capital, but from throughout the rest of Ulster as well. <16>

Meanwhile, as militant Unionism gathered strength in 1913, some Irish nationalists decided it was time to follow the example of the north. If Unionists could claim that they were a community with a right to resist home rule by force of arms, then the nationalists could justly reply that they were a community with the right to insist upon home rule by force of arms. <17> In November of 1913, the Irish Volunteers were inaugurated under the inspiration of the Gaelic scholar Eoin MacNeill. <18> The founders of the Irish Volunteers emphasized that the organization was not created with the desire to fight the UVF or to place pressure on the liberal government which was, after all, proceeding with the Home Rule Bill in the face of Unionist opposition. Rather, the aim of the Irish Volunteers was simply to defend the rights of Ireland and the ultimate prize of home rule. John Redmond was extremely determined to maintain the Parliamentary party's unrelenting grip on all nationalist organizations, and by June of 1914, he did indeed have control of the movement. <19>

Thus, as time elapsed since the reintroduction of the Home Rule Bill in 1912, preparations for its resistance by Ulster Unionists and for its enforcement by Irish Nationalists rapidly developed along military lines. As each opposing side concentrated on strengthening their armed forces in case the crisis situation required it, the political campaigning of the opposing sides flourished as well. In September of 1913 Nationalists and Liberal members of Parliament embarked on an autumn campaign on behalf of the Home Rule Bill. As *The Times* reported on September 16, 1913:

This campaign will be of an unprecedented character, both from the point of view of those who will conduct it and the wide geographical area over which the operations will be spread. AU the Nationalist members, as well as Liberal members of Parliament, will take part in it. Mr. John Redmond, the Irish leader, will speak at North Hampton on November 17, at Birmingham on November 19, and at Alloa on November 21. This series of mass meetings will give the Irish leader an opportunity of restating the case for home rule. <20>

The Times also reported that the home rule council, which had been formed to direct the political activities of the home rule movement, had confidently stated, "It is obvious from this list of engagements that the country will have an even better opportunity than before of becoming acquainted with the reasonableness and statesmanship of home rule contained in Mr. Asquith's Bill." <21> The council also hoped that the result of their comprehensive scheme of propaganda work would be to further convince the electorate that the Home Rule Bill was indeed a fair and adequate solution of a long-standing problem. The council also felt that "the complete absence of any competing or alternative

proposal makes it essential, not only in the interests of Ireland, but in the interests of Great Britain and the Empire that the Bill should pass as promptly as the Parliament Act permits." <22> Once again, the undaunting determination of the home rulers was demonstrated. It was only a matter of time before the Home Rule Bill would become law, and Irish Nationalists and Liberal leaders realized the importance of persuading those who were doubtful of its benefits and outwardly opposed to its implementation that the bill was fair and necessary.

Although Redmond and his fellow nationalists were incredibly determined and committed to keeping the entire island of Ireland together under the Home Rule Bill, the agitation and disruption caused by Ulster's desire to remain part of the United Kingdom could not be ignored. Eventually, the liberal government began to recognize the building seriousness of the situation created by Ulster Unionists, and it started to consider the prospect of excluding North-East Ulster from the Bill. In the fall of 1913, Mr. Winston Churchill, a liberal and supporter of home rule, discussed the case for Ulster's exclusion. The Times gave a detailed explanation of Mr. Churchill's ideas for an Ulster compromise and the problems associated with it. The latter part of a speech given by Churchill in September of 1913 was accepted in Ireland as a direct offer from the government to exclude North-East Ulster from the operation of the Home Rule Bill. However, the government hoped that the isolation of North-East Ulster would not be permanent. Furthermore, by exclusion, Mr. Churchill meant genuine exclusion and not just Ulster's control over its own education and police under an Irish Parliament. <23> *The Times* also reported that the Irish people took Mr. Churchill's speech to mean that "the Government is now quite prepared to buy off the resistance of North-East Ulster to the Home Rule Bill by excluding from the operation of the Bill at least four of the north-eastern counties." <24>

Churchill saw the exclusion of North-Eastern Ulster from the Home Rule Bill as a way of alleviating some of the conflict and strife that could possibly lead to a civil war. However, this solution had its own set of problems. The Nationalist party had maintained consistently that home rule without Ulster would not be worth having. The whole feeling for home rule was largely sentimental, yet there was a practical side to keeping Ulster as well. Without the cooperation of industrial Ulster, Ireland under home rule could not hope to be self-supporting. <25> Furthermore, what about the unionists of South and West Ulster? Many of them had pledged their loyalty to Unionist leaders, and they certainly did not want to be cut off from the rest of Ulster and be left at the mercy of a Dublin Parliament. It would not be moral or decent for Carson and his colleagues to desert them now. <26>

Thus, with Churchill's proposal came a variety of responses and concerns regarding the situation of Ulster and how it should be dealt with. Lord Grey, who was a Liberal and foreign secretary from 1906-1916, gave a rather compelling argument defending his reasons for supporting the exclusion of Ulster from home rule. He explained that if the people of Ireland, who are but one-fifteenth of the United Kingdom, are right in refusing to be governed in matters purely of domestic concern from London, then the people of the four north-east counties of Ulster, who are one-fourth of the population in Ireland,

have the right to refuse to be governed from Dublin. <27> Grey went on to passionately declare:

The basic principle of democracy is that people should be allowed to govern themselves in matters which concern themselves exclusively. The basic principle of tyranny is that people should be ruled in these matters by force against their will. In my opinion the attempt to compel the north-east corner of Ulster to accept the rule of Dublin is a crime. <28>

Thus, the Ulster question remained a thorn in the side of the home rule movement, and the Irish problem continued to escalate. However, the outbreak of World War I, also known as the Great War, in August of 1914 created a distraction of incredible magnitude. It provided a unique chance for the people of Ireland to sink their political differences in a wider common cause. John Redmond pledged that Ireland would defend her own shores through the joint efforts of the UVF and the Irish volunteers. <29> This significant turn of events was shortly followed in September of 1914 with the placing of the Home Rule Bill on the statute book. However, its implementation was to be delayed until the end of the war, and a promise was made of amending the bill to deal with the Ulster question. <30> Redmond saw his role as one of leading nationalist Ireland into the empire, gaining the admiration and goodwill of Great Britain, and maybe even reaching a measure of agreement with Ulster Unionists. How did he intend to accomplish such goals? By Irish Nationalist participation in the war. The scenes in the House of Commons when the Home Rule Bill was finally given royal assent were those of excitement and celebration. A green flag was produced, and Redmond responded to a cry of 'God save Ireland' with the cry 'And God save England too!' <31>

Thus, with the coming of the War, in 1914, the union of 1801 was dead, and Ireland had won at least a free constitution. However, the bill was suspended with the outbreak of World War I, and many problems remained unsolved. Serious questions about the future stability of Ireland as a free state remained unanswered. It was not until after the Great War that the political leaders could concentrate their efforts on answering such questions.

Notes

1 D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p279.

2 Walter L. Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today* (D.C. Heath and Company 1992), p153.

3 Arnstein, *Britain*, p161.

4 D. George Boyce, *Ireland 1828-1923: From Ascendancy to Democracy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p79.

5 John McGarry & Brendan O'Leary, *The Future of Northern Ireland* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1990), p2.

6 Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: a Study of Anglo-Irish Conflict 1780-1980* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p52.

7 Boyce, *Nationalism*, p280.

8 D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth Century Ireland: The Search for Stability* (Maryland: Barnes and Noble Books, 1991), p234.

9 Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, p235.

10 Boyce, *Ireland 1828-1923*, p82.

11 Ibid.

12 Boyce, *Ireland 1828-1923*, p83.

13 "The Resistance of Ulster: Military Preparations," *The Times* 25 Aug. 1913, p6.

14 "The Ulster Volunteers," *The Times* 20 Aug. 1913, p8.

15 Boyce, *Nineteenth*, p237.

16 "The Ulster Volunteers," *The Times* 20 Aug. 1913, p8.

17 Boyce, *Ireland 1828-1923*, p83.

18 Boyce, *Nationalism*, p283.

19 Ibid.

20 "A Home Rule Campaign," *The Times* 16 Sept. 1913, p8.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 "Mr. Churchill's Speech: Opinion in Ireland," *The Times* 10 Oct. 1913, p6.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 "The Irish Crisis: Mr. Churchill's Speech and After," *The Times* 11 Oct. 1913, p10.

28 Ibid.

29 Boyce, *Nineteenth*, p242.

30 Boyce, *Ireland 1828-1923*, p88.

31 Boyce, *Nineteenth* p243.

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