

Irish Home Rule and Resistance, 1912-1916

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“Those of us who have been struggling in this cause for thirty years are thankful to feel that at last the fighting is practically over, and that all that remains is to settle the exact terms on which the Treaty of Peace is to be drawn up.” [1](#)
-John Redmond, Irish MP and Chairman of United Irish Party

Irish Nationalist [2](#) leader John Redmond's enthusiasm in 1910 for a Home Rule settlement belies the fact that in the decade following his statement, Home Rule would become one of the most controversial, complicated, and violently contested issues in Irish and British history. Contrary to the settlement that Redmond anticipated, Home Rule would not take effect until 1920, after Redmond's death and after Irish republicans had already determined that nothing short of complete independence would satisfy them. By 1920, the Ulster Crisis and Redmond's "concessions" had reduced Home Rule to a shadow of William Gladstone's 1886 and 1893 proposals. The Easter Rebellion of 1916 by the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and the execution of its leaders by the British ended any political legitimacy Britain might have maintained in Ireland prior to the Rebellion. Before the rebellion, the Irish people in general still held some faith in Redmond and his Parliamentary Party's ability to find a political solution. This faith slowly disintegrated after 1912, and by 1920 the ideological organization Sinn Fein and its militant brother the IRB held effective power.

To Sinn Fein, the IRB, and other Irish nationalists [3](#) that sought complete independence, politics became the byword for a complicated process dictated by British interests that would never give them the freedom they desired, or, in their minds, deserved. Revolution provided a simple, effective solution, and as the events that took place between the Third Home Rule Proposal in 1912 and the outbreak of war in 1914 illustrate, the political complications of the Home Rule issue increasingly disillusioned the Irish and served to turn the attention away from parliamentary solutions to the ideology espoused by Sinn Fein that sought complete independence for Ireland and a revival of Gaelic culture.

The revolutionary solutions that took place and ultimately led to the creation of the Irish Free State (and consequently the Irish Republic) may not have ever occurred if Home Rule had taken effect in 1914 as intended. The House of Commons had passed the Home Rule Bill, albeit with significant amendments to the 1886 and 1893 Bills, for the third time, and by the terms set by the Parliament Act of 1911, the House of Lords could only delay the Bill for two years. In 1914, Home Rule would become the official policy governing Anglo-Irish relations. However, Ulster's resistance to Home Rule and threat of instigating civil war and the outbreak of World War I eliminated the possibility of Britain ever implementing Home Rule in its 1914 form, due to the effects of the Easter Rebellion and Irish abandonment of Home Rule. While hindsight provides a clearer vision of Britain's failures in regard to Home Rule than what politicians of the time could have anticipated, if the House of Lords

had passed Home Rule in 1912, the complications of the two-year “grace period” between the passage of Home Rule and its taking effect would have likely only given way to other complications, but of a nature that would have favored Britain and Home Rule, rather than taking the opposite effect of inspiring the Irish towards independence.

The reasoning behind the House of Lords rejection of Home Rule appears obvious, given the history of English aristocrats’ relationship with the Irish people. The English Lords generally had a natural hatred for Irish, seeing them as inferior and crude beings. This view was the by-product of arguments over land; most English Lords owned Irish property, and for them Irish land reform meant lost income. The aristocrats’ picture of the Irish as a “semi-civilized, wholly-uneducated race of near barbarians, who were permitted to exist merely as an act of grace on the part of their English conquerors” rationalized the fact that the Lords could find no pretext to account for past atrocities in Ireland. The Lords, traditionally a Conservative bulwark, also made a habit of opposing any Liberal reform legislation.⁴ This prejudice prompted British Liberal MP David Lloyd George to introduce the Parliament Bill that curtailed the Lords’ political influence, though Lloyd George’s interest was less in settling Home Rule than in advancing his own Liberal agenda. Thus the Lords knew they could only delay Home Rule, so why did they not seem to bother arguing whether Home Rule provided a more favorable solution in 1912 or in 1914? The Lords’ decision to outright reject Home Rule seemed like a habitual exercise or an instinctive reaction. While accepting Home Rule would have appeared as a violation of Conservative principle, given that Home Rule was to take effect anyway, acceptance of it would have actually benefited the Lords by checking the growth of Irish separatist nationalist movements, by taking effect at a time when the Irish public still believed in a political solution, and by forcing an immediate settlement of the Ulster conflict. The failure of both Liberals and Conservatives to foresee and promptly deal with the situation in Ulster was one of the greatest political flaws of Parliament. Patricia Jalland argues that:

“An early commitment to the exclusion of the four predominantly Protestant counties of Ulster from Home Rule ... might have helped to undermine the basis for Unionist opposition to the Home Rule Bill in the country at large. It might have produced a long-term settlement of the Irish question which, whether conducive to Irish unity or not, would have been more peaceable than the events of the next ten years.”⁵

A peaceful solution, in other words, was not likely in the works whether the Lords passed Home Rule immediately or not. Had Parliament foreseen the Ulster conflict, a solution such as exclusion, which exempted the Ulster counties from Home Rule for a period of six years, could have taken effect by 1912, instead of being one of the key elements in the failure to pass Home Rule in 1914. The Lords knew Ulster would immediately resist once the House of Commons issued Home Rule for the third time, so why not pass Home Rule in 1912 while Irish popular opinion still generally sided with a political settlement? The idea of exclusion would still surely have infuriated groups all Irish Nationalist groups, including Redmond’s Parliamentary Party, but in 1912 Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Brotherhood lacked any military strength and, more importantly, did not have the sympathy and support they would gain between 1912 and 1916.⁶

The House of Lords, true to form, decided to postpone the inevitable. It is hard to imagine that the Lords anticipated any kind of reversal of the Home Rule policy in the two years preceding its passage, though Ulster’s refusal to accept Home Rule and the Britain’s inability to coerce them

could have, and almost did, manipulate the Bill so that it favored Ulster. In the fall of 1913 Sir Edward Carson, leader of the Ulster Unionist Council, and Andrew Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, decided that exclusion might offer a reasonable solution, though they feared it might earn them the resentment of southern Unionists wishing to uphold the 1801 Act of Union between Ireland and Britain. By January 1914, negotiations between Conservatives and Liberals over the possibility of exclusion had failed to reach an agreement, and on January 15 Bonar Law announced that negotiations had formally ceased.⁷ War with Germany began the following August, and Home Rule was set by the wayside while Ulster Unionists and Irish Nationalists grew more agitated.

Ulster Unionist and Southern Unionist's grievance with Home Rule resulted chiefly from the fear of a Catholic-dominated Parliament and the loss of the right to full British citizenship. Unionists also feared that Home Rule would endanger commercial relations between Ireland and Britain, threaten personal liberty, lead towards a complete split between Ireland and England, grant the Irish Executive too much power, reward unruly behavior, and end the progress made by English involvement in Irish affairs.⁸ While the Unionists' fear of Home Rule marking the first step towards legitimacy held some credence,⁹ their fear of the Irish Executive having too much power was without merit, since the Irish Parliament and its leader were subject to Imperial authority. This, in fact, was one of the more prominent complaints by Nationalists about Home Rule, since it implied that they must swear allegiance to the king, and that Britain ultimately retained complete control over Ireland. Unionists' fears of a Catholic-dominated, anti-Protestant legislature also held little merit when considering the Liberal intentions for Irish government. Liberals sought to create an Irish political system that adhered to the English model; Home Rule would promote a division of politics in Ireland like that in England, based on social questions that distinguished political parties and their agendas. Under such a system, Protestants would simply constitute another party, but not the minority outcast that they feared they would become.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Home Rule Bill specifically stated that "the Irish Parliament ... shall not ... give a preference, privilege, or advantage ... on account of religious belief."¹¹ Though the Unionists had a few minor legitimate arguments against Home Rule, such arguments did not warrant the threat of instigating civil war. Liberals believed that the Unionists simply used Home Rule to attack the Parliament Act which had curtailed Conservative power, and Unionists almost admitted this.¹² Regardless of whether or not Unionists had any substantial arguments against Home Rule, the fact of the matter is that they believed they did, and they managed to convince fellow Conservatives and Irish Unionists that they did. The importance of perception as opposed to reality plays a very significant role in determining the extent of both the Ulster Unionists' and the Irish republicans' influence.

The development of Sinn Fein ("Ourselves" or "Ourselves Alone") best illustrates this. Led by Arthur Griffiths, Sinn Fein formed in 1905 and committed itself to pursuing complete independence for Ireland. The Sinn Fein position states that the goal of Sinn Fein is:

National self-development through the recognition of the duties and rights of citizenship on the part of the individual, and by the aid and support of all movements originating from within Ireland, instinct with National tradition, and not looking outside Ireland for the accomplishment of their aims.¹³

Griffiths concept of "national self-development" focused chiefly on Ireland developing a manufacturing industry. Britain had long used and encouraged Irish agricultural production while it

maintained control over manufacturing; Griffiths argued that “a nation cannot promote and further its civilization ... equally as well by exchanging agricultural products for manufactured goods as by establishing a manufacturing power of its own.”¹⁴ He firmly believed that Ireland could become an industrial power, even though they would have to face the impossible demand of competing with British industrial production. Griffith’s economic plans and concept of the ideal Irish republic had little appeal for the general public.¹⁵ Rather, the appeal of Sinn Fein did come from its unwavering commitment to nothing short of complete Irish independence. Despite the fact that Sinn Fein never achieved its goals of completely reviving Gaelic culture (or their conception of it),¹⁶ they were perceived as an organization that truly represented Ireland and offered a solution, in contrast to the growing perception that the British lacked sincerity on Home Rule and would only become further entangled in political arguments. Stated simply, Sinn Fein appealed to the Irish because it represented the complete opposite of Home Rule.¹⁷ C.J. Dolan, an Irish Home Rule MP, summed it up by declaring: “Sinn Fein means the end of empty talk and humbug, and the beginning of a genuine National work; it means more wealth, more employment, and better wages for the people; it heralds the dawn of a new era rich with promise for our long suffering country.”¹⁸

The Irish disillusionment with Home Rule began in 1912 with the proposal of the Third Home Rule Bill. The terms of the Bill disappointed the Irish, but they still maintained the ‘Bill was better than nothing, and that it would mean the insertion of the thin edge of the wedge.’¹⁹ The proposed Irish Parliament only possessed a limited veto through the Lord Lieutenant, but Britain’s maintaining of imperial authority made such a provision worthless. Contrary to the Irish hopes for almost complete autonomy, the Home Rule Bill proposed to give Ireland a political force in name that had no real power.²⁰ From Griffiths’ perspective, accepting Home Rule meant conceding that Britain constitutionally ruled Ireland, a notion which would violate the core principle of Sinn Fein if true.²¹ The Home Rule Bill also failed to adhere to Griffiths’ economic plan; Herbert Samuel’s little understood fiscal policy gave Britain almost complete control of Irish finances,²² including, to Griffiths’ dismay, control over customs, which would consequently ensure that Ireland would remain dependent on England for manufactured goods. Griffiths hoped for a policy similar to what Britain granted dominion states like Australia and South Africa. While Britain had “Imperial Authority” over such states, they could oppose legislation by manipulating customs duties on British goods; Ireland had no such option.²³

Advocates of Ireland’s independence, namely Sinn Fein and the IRB, frustrated by Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party’s inability to pass a suitable measure of Home Rule, increasingly believed that violence might provide the only solution for their cause. Though Sinn Fein did not openly advocate armed rebellion, Griffiths always believed that Irish independence required the use of armed force. Griffith and the IRB found the impetus to begin “arming Ireland” when in 1913, Carson began smuggling arms from Germany and enlisting men in the Ulster Volunteer Force, as a threat to parliamentarians about what may happen if they passed Home Rule.

Parliament did nothing to prevent Carson from forming his military, instead dismissing the Ulster threat as ‘given to bluster and threats’ and claiming that their resistance would ‘melt away.’²⁴ Chief Secretary of the Irish Office Augustine Birrell decided that using force to coerce Carson and his Volunteers would only “create martyrs and provide Carson with precisely the publicity he craved; popular passions in Ulster would be inflamed.”²⁵ However, when Birrell finally decided that the situation had gotten out of hand and sent troops to Curragh, they promptly refused to attack their Protestant brethren and mutinied, as expected by Carson.²⁶ Liberals in Parliament had waited too

long to act, and their previous dismissal of the Ulster threat had only “inflamed Ulster Unionists further.”²⁷

The IRB, the descendant of the Fenians who had led a revolution against the British in 1867, sought to create a Volunteer force that would protect republican interests from their now-militarized northern province. In November of 1913, Eoin MacNeill presided over the first meeting of the Irish Volunteers, held in Dublin. The Irish Volunteers swore to ‘secure and maintain the rights of all the people of Ireland.’²⁸ The Volunteers publicly claimed that no existing organization needed to support them, but the IRB, Sinn Fein, the Gaelic League, and the Citizen Army of the Irish Transport General Workers Union all had involvement with the Irish Volunteers.

Two days after the Irish Volunteers formed, Parliament passed the Arms Act prohibiting all importations of arms and ammunition into Ireland, which came chiefly from Germany and the United States. The Volunteers questioned this apparent “preferential treatment” for Ulster; the apparent favoritism spurred their recruitment and did nothing to prevent arms smuggling.²⁹ On July 26, 1914, an arms shipment arrived at Howth. While parading back to Dublin with the arms, a British regiment, the King’s Own Scottish Borderers, halted the parade and demanded the surrender of the smuggled weapons. The Volunteers refused and returned to town triumphantly. The British troops marched into Howth and shot into a crowd, killing four and wounding thirty-seven civilians.³⁰ The British made up for not reacting to Ulster by overreacting at Howth.

The massacre at Bachelor’s Walk (as it came to be known) infuriated the Irish Volunteers and their “non-associated” affiliates and, in conjunction with political frustrations, marked the shift from political to military solutions. Nationalist Volunteers who had supported John Redmond’s efforts in Parliament defected to the Irish Volunteers;³¹ after Bachelor’s Walk, Redmond would spend the rest of his life “representing” an Irish people that no longer supported him, and his attempts to mediate between the interests of Ireland and those of Great Britain only further alienated him from the Irish revolutionary leaders.

Redmond’s demise symbolizes the Irish’s growing disenchantment with finding a political solution. The Irish Parliamentary Party had always survived by maintaining a balance of power between the Conservative and Liberal parties; by 1906, after the fall of Irish MP Charles Stewart Parnell and the temporary abandonment of Home Rule, the Party had lost this advantage Redmond’s hold on his party ultimately relied on his ability to pass Home Rule; in this he took too long.³² Due to his desperate efforts to reach a Home Rule agreement at almost any cost,³³ Redmond was seen as a puppet of the British Parliament. After the unrealized hopes for a favorable Home Rule Bill, the prejudiced treatment regarding Ulster, and the delay of the amended Bill, the Irish began to see British politics, and thus Redmond, as representative strictly of British interests.³⁴ Even before the war, the Irish questioned the sincerity of Parliament’s stance on Home Rule, and whether or not the MP’s sought to respect Irish interests, or that rather they merely saw to reach an agreement that would Ireland from ever becoming a problem. Many of the new Liberal MP’s saw Home Rule as the fulfillment of Gladstone’s “old Liberalism,” and believed it should be settled quickly so “New Liberals” could move on to their own agenda.³⁵ This growing doubt about the Liberals and Redmond’s intentions left the Irish people with no apparent political representation; consequently, they turned to the Irish Volunteers or Sinn Fein.

Redmond realized this, and the Parliamentary Party did all it could to “strangle the movement.”³⁶ However, this only appeared as an attempt to divide the various allied Irish factions and contributed to the belief that Redmond stood in opposition to Irish independence. For

Redmond, Home Rule represented the final solution; for the republicans and increasingly the public, Home Rule, if accepted at all, only marked the first step. This fundamental difference explains why Redmond lost support after 1912.

He remained sure of his conviction that a Home Rule agreement could solve the Irish question; in a response to MP Sir Edward Grey's comment that:

"The general feeling throughout Ireland ... does not make the Irish question a consideration which we feel we have to take into account."

Redmond replied:

"I honestly believe that the democracy of Ireland will turn with the utmost anxiety and sympathy to this country [England], in every trial and every danger that may overtake it."³⁷

Despite such optimism, these comments reflect a rather naïve view of the Irish situation; it had become profoundly more complicated by 1914, and the rather apathetic attitude expressed by Grey illustrates how parliamentarians simply wanted the Home Rule issue out of the way. World War I would provide a deviation, but Ireland's refusal to partake in the war only kept their focus on independence while England had, for the time being, placed Home Rule secondary to the war effort. Ironically, Home Rule did not get out of the way, but reappeared in the violent form of the Easter Rebellion and an Irish separatist movement that had come to life between 1912 and 1916. When Home Rule finally became a non-issue, it had little to do with parliamentary politics; rather, revolution had occurred, and Britain had been caught off-guard by a problem that had festered for over fifty years.

Had the Lords passed the Home Rule Act in 1912, armed conflict would still have likely occurred; with an issue that involved numerous opposing groups and internal division amongst such groups, there was little chance of avoiding it. The fear of Ulster causing civil strife and the inability to solve such a crisis led the Lords to delay Home Rule. However, the Lords should have realized that Ulster's tactic of trusting the British army to not act could have very well worked both ways. Ulster wanted to be part of the Union; they had little to gain by attacking it. While such a basic notion involves many more complex issues, the fact remains that in the two years preceding the passage of Home Rule, Irish revolutionary movements took advantage of poor British policies and a weakened Home Rule Bill to finally gain the necessary support for the push towards independence. The delay of Home Rule and the outbreak of World War, in effect, put the fate of Ireland in Ireland's hands, which, according to the policy of Sinn Fein, was the way it should have always been.

Notes

1. Redmond, J.E. *What Ireland Wants* (Dublin, 1910), pp. 14-15 (excerpted from Mitchell, Arthur, and O Snodaigh, Padraig, (editors). *Irish Political Documents 1869-1916*. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press), 1989. p. 129)
2. Nationalist refers to John Redmond's political party that sought Home Rule at all costs; nationalist

- simply refers to those of the Irish who sought either Home Rule or complete independence.
3. Namely the Irish Volunteers, Citizen Army/Irish Transport General Workers Union, and the Gaelic League.
 4. Jones, Francis P. *History of the Sinn Fein Movement and the Irish Rebellion of 1916*. (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons), 1917. pp. 66-67
 5. Peatling, G.K. *British Opinion and Irish self-government, 1865-1925: From Unionism to Liberal Commonwealth*. (Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press), 2001. p. 80
 6. The Irish did not begin importing arms until 1913, upon the formation of the Irish Volunteers, in response to the Sir Edward Carson's armament of Ulster.
 7. O'Day, Alan. *Irish Home Rule, 1867-1921*. (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1998. p. 256-258
 8. "Southern Unionists on Home Rule." reported in *The Times*, Oct. 11, 1911. (excerpted from Mitchell and O Snodaigh, *Documents*. pp.133-34)
 9. Jones states that the Home Rule Bill was "never accepted by the Irish people as a final settlement, but was looked on simply as the basis for that larger measure of freedom they desire," implying complete independence. Jones, *History of Sinn Fein*, p. 52
 10. Peatling, *British Opinion*, p.72
 11. *Acts parl. U.K.*, 1914 (4 & 5 Geo. V, c. 90) Sep. 18, 1914. (excerpted from Mitchell and O Snodaigh, *Documents*. p. 173)
 12. Liberals also tended to associate the Ulster cause with the 'Anglo-Irish minority's traditional pursuit of ascendancy in Ireland.' Peatling, *British Opinion*, p. 73
 13. reported in the *United Irishman*, Dec. 9, 1905. (excerpted from Mitchell and O Snodaigh, *Documents*. p.120)
 14. *Ibid*. p. 122
 15. Garvin, Tom. *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858-1928*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1987. p. 6
 16. *Ibid*. pp. 11, Garvin states the "the picture of Gaelic Irish civilization that emerges is very different from the one which the rebels had in their minds." Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries*, p. 109.
 109. Graham Walker states that "the partisan sense of history was crucial to the typical Sinn Feiner. It provided a way of fashioning a holy weapon out of the past; the past was Sinn Fein's testimonial." Walker, Graham. "The Irish Dr. Goebbels': Frank Gallagher and the Irish Republican Propaganda." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27:1 (Jan., 1992), p. 152
 17. Jones, *History of Sinn Fein*, p. 59
 18. from *Sinn Fein*, Feb. 22, 1908 (excerpted from Mitchell and O Snodaigh, *Documents*. p. 125
 19. Jones, *History of Sinn Fein*, p. 72
 20. from "Manifesto of the Irish Volunteers," *Volunteer Gazette*, Dec. 1913 (excerpted from Mitchell and O Snodaigh, *Documents*. p. 148)
 21. *Ibid*. p. 59
 22. O'Day, *Irish Home Rule*, p. 246
 23. Jones, *History of Sinn Fein*, p. 53
 24. Peatling, *British Opinion*, p. 72
 25. Jalland, Patricia. "A Liberal Chief Secretary and the Irish Question: Augustine Birrell, 1907-1914." *The Historical Journal*, 19:2 (Jun., 1976), p. 443
 26. Jones, *History of Sinn Fein*, p. 79
 27. Peatling, *British Opinion*, p. 73

28. Announced at Dublin meeting, November 26, 1914. (excerpted from Mitchell and O Snodaigh, Documents. p. 147)
29. Jones, History of Sinn Fein, p. 86
30. Ibid. pp. 92-95
31. Ibid. p. 98
32. Boyce, David G. "British Opinion, Ireland, and the War, 1916-1918." The Historical Journal, 17:3 (Sep., 1974), pp. 580
33. Redmond did oppose exclusion for Ulster. O'Day, Irish Home Rule, p. 254
34. from "Manifesto of the Irish Volunteers," Volunteer Gazette, Dec. 1913 (excerpted from Mitchell and O Snodaigh, Documents. p. 148)
35. Peatling, British Opinion, p. 77
36. Jones, History of Sinn Fein, p. 53
37. Hansard 5 (Commons), lxxv, 1824, August 3, 1914. (excerpted from Mitchell and O Snodaigh, Documents. p. 167)