

John Redmond: A Footnote in History

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John Redmond

Dermot Meleady in his biography of John Redmond concludes that 'rarely is the life's work of a public person so comprehensively erased by history.'¹ Redmond is the forgotten man of Irish history, a footnote to the events that led to Independence in 1922. And this may have remained the case except for the small matter of the upcoming hundredth anniversary of the 1916 Rising. Given the rise in support for Sinn Fein, how does a right-wing conservative government celebrate the violent revolutionary upheavals that led to the founding of the state, without handing a propaganda coup to Sinn Fein?

This was the context for a speech by John Bruton, the former Fine Gael leader, who stated that there was 'no justification for the 1916 Rising; either morally or militarily'. Bruton argued that Irish in-

dependence would have been achieved by constitutional means in the course of the twentieth century following the enactment of the Home Rule Bill of 1914, which was supported by John Redmond, the leader of Irish Parliamentary party at Westminster.

This was the answer to the Government's dilemma. John Redmond was to be rehabilitated as the sensible non-violent voice of Irish nationalism. According to Bruton the example of the recent Scottish referendum showed that a gradual road to independence was possible.

Redmond

John Redmond was born in Dublin in 1856. His family were wealthy business people from County Wexford. After the fall of Parnell in 1890 and the subsequent split in the parliamentary party Redmond led the minority Parnellite faction. There were a number of factors that led to the fall of Parnell. The first was Parnell's own manifesto, which was couched in a fighting tone that was anathema to several members of his own party, who declared themselves unable to support it. The second was the vehement attack made on him by the Irish bishops, on the ground that his private life unfitted him to hold the post of political leader; the final cause was the declaration of Gladstone that he would not enter into negotiations with the party while Parnell remained as its chief. The question of who was to succeed Parnell was one of great importance. Whoever was chosen had a hard task ahead of him. The party was divided, contesting seats against each other at the polls. John Redmond himself was defeated in Cork, Par-

¹Dermot Meleady, *John Redmond: The National Leader*, (Merrion, Dublin, 2014), p. 410.

nell's old constituency by a member of his own party, but was elected for Waterford against Michael Davitt in 1891. Redmond had been closely connected with the last days of the leader and had organized Parnell's funeral, but he was, to a large extent, an untried man; even Parnell had recognized in him no outstanding capacity for leadership. Redmond came to the front chiefly because of his fidelity to the dead chief, but with little prestige or promise of support. He did not stand on the same platform as that of Parnell. Redmond was never a separatist, as Parnell was at heart. Redmond was always in favour of Ireland playing her part in the Empire. The Dominion status enjoyed Canada was always present in his mind as a solution to the 'Irish problem', and he looked forward to an autonomous and prosperous Ireland on similar lines, bound by ties of mutual benefit to both countries.

Home Rule

In April 1912 Lloyd George's Home Rule Bill was put before Parliament, and despite the setback created by the defeat of the bill in the House of Lords, it began its torturous three year cycle through the British parliamentary system, at the end of which it would become law. This was a divisive time in British politics. The crisis over the House of Lords veto over legislation, the growing militancy of the suffragettes, and the ongoing industrial disputes thrown up by the 'great unrest' had fractured the liberal ascendancy - or as George Dangerfield described it 'the strange death of liberal England'.² The Conservative leader Bonar Law described the Liberal government as a 'revolutionary committee' that had seized power by fraud, and therefore the Tories were justified in acting beyond the consti-

tution in order to resist it.

Fatally, at least for Ireland, Bonar Law and Churchill choose to play the 'Orange card'. Bonar Law stated that even if Home Rule was passed in parliament 'there are things that are stronger than parliamentary majorities' and that if any attempt is made to deprive Ulster Protestants of their birthright then, 'I can imagine no lengths of resistance to which Ulster will not go'.³

This was the green light, if such a phrase is appropriate, for the Ulster Unionists to declare their total opposition - symbolised by the launch of a Solemn League and Covenant signed by 400,000 Unionists - to resist Home Rule by any means necessary. This was followed on 31 January 1913 by the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, who were armed and organised on military lines.

The developments in Ulster had not gone unnoticed by nationalists in the south, and many felt that the time was right to equip itself in the same way. The IRB had been drilling a small cadre of its members, but Bulmer Hobson argued that they needed a mass volunteer movement open to all supporters of Home Rule. As the IRB considered the possibility, the sudden announcement in an article in *An Claidheamh Soluis* on 1 November by the politically moderate Professor Eoin MacNeill entitled 'The north began' suggesting such an organisation, took everyone by surprise. A few days later, prompted by Bulmer Hobson, MacNeill organised the launch of the Irish Volunteers at a mass rally in the Rotunda on 25 November 1913. The rally was a great success, despite their failure to invite Jim Larkin or representatives of the ITGWU on to the platform. Over 3,000 recruits enrolled on the night, and within six months The National Irish Volunteers numbered 75,000. A commit-

²George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, (Capricorn Books, London, 1961).

³*The Times* (London), 29 July 1912.

tee of thirty, of which twelve were members of the IRB, was set up to oversee the Volunteers. Hobson and the IRB saw the possibilities of realising the Fenian ideals of 1848 and 1867, but this time with real forces at their command.

In April 1914, British army offices stationed in the Curragh Camp threatened to resign their commission if ordered north to deal with the Unionists in the event of a revolt against the imposition of Home Rule in Ireland. A week later the Ulster Volunteer force landed a large consignment of Arms purchased from Germany and distributed them across the north.

During May and June, John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party, manoeuvred to gain control of the Volunteers. Redmond fearing that the actions of the Volunteers might jeopardise the Home Rule bill insisted that twenty five of his nominees be added to the National Volunteer committee. The IRB element tried to resist Redmond's takeover of the organisation, but were outvoted. The Irish National Volunteers, once again following the example of their northern brethren, landed a consignment of arms from Germany at Howth, Co. Dublin, in July 1914. As the British army troops returned to Dublin, frustrated by their failure to intercept the arms they clashed with the crowd along Bachelor's Walk. They opened fire on the crowd, three people were killed and thirty-eight wounded. It appeared that this was the prelude to a violent explosion that was about to burst the country apart.

Ireland was in a 'state o'chassis', The British Officer class had effectively mutinied, three civilian armies were drilled and armed, and as the sun set over the last day of July 1914 it appeared that the rival parties were on a collision course.

The War

The outbreak of World War I on 4 August engulfed Britain in a crisis that dwarfed its problems in Ireland. Prime Minister Asquith shelved the problem by putting the Home Rule bill on the statute books, but postponed its implementation until after the war ended. He also provided that the bill would not be implemented until statutory provision has been made for the exclusion of the Ulster counties. In this way he managed to appease both the constitutional Nationalists and the Unionists. But as FSL Lyons has noted; 'It was, of course, an illusion. The Irish problem had been refrigerated, not liquidated. Nothing had been solved, and all was still to play for'.⁴

In two speeches delivered by Redmond in August and September 1914 he offered the Irish Volunteers to support the British war effort, 'to go wherever the firing line extends'. Redmond told the House of Commons that it could remove its troops from Ireland for the duration of the war and that the Irish Volunteers in the South would 'join arms' with their Ulster counterparts to defend the coasts of Ireland' He went on to say 'Is it too much to hope that out of this situation there may spring a result which will be good not merely for the Empire, but good for the future welfare of and integrity of the Irish nation?'⁵ Redmond's appeal to the Irish Volunteers to enlist in the war effort caused a split in the movement. 140,000 followed Redmond and formed the National Volunteers, and about half of those enlisted in the British army over the following eighteen months. A minority, about 12,000 remained as the original Irish Volunteers effectively controlled by the Irish Republican Brotherhood. And

⁴ F S L Lyons, 'The developing crisis, 1907-14', *A New History of Ireland*, 9 Vols., (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989), Vol. 6, p. 144.

⁵Quoted in *Irish Times* supplement 'Too Much to Hope', 20 September 2014, p. 13.

it was this minority who were the core of the Easter Rising two years later.

Redmond's speech in the House of Commons on 3 September and at Wood- enbridge on 20 September 1914 effectively ended his career. He had hoped that by offering to support the war Britain would reward Ireland with Home Rule. But Carson and the Ulster Unionists were under the impression that their offer of the Ul- ster Volunteer Force would copper-fasten the Union. The British Government was happy enough to play both sides and, en- couraged by Redmond, about 100,000 from the South of Ireland, including about 32,000 of the National Volunteers marched off to war believing that they would be re- warded by Britain by the introduction of Home Rule for the their sacrifice.



John Redmond on a British Army recruitment poster

Easter Rising

Yeats' prophetic lines on the 1916 rising - 'all changed, changed utterly; a terrible beauty is born'⁶ could serve as an epitaph for Redmond. The suspension of the Home Rule Bill for the duration of the war weak- ened his position in Ireland. The fact that he chose to remain in London meant that he was out of touch with events in Ireland, and despite being warned by the British Prime Minister that a military rising was a real possibility, he was taken by surprise by the Rising in Dublin that Easter. In Westminster he spoke of his 'horror and detestation' and denounced it as treason to the cause of Home Rule. In the after- math of the Rising it is to his credit that revolted by the drawn out series of execu- tions he called for an end to the executions and asked for leniency for the rank and file rebels.

Redmond chose to stand with the Em- pire when the tide of history was flowing in the other direction. Redmond and his as- sociates had envisaged that the war would be only of a short duration - that it would be 'all over by Christmas'. But the car- nage on the Western front had turned peo- ple against the war. This was killing on an industrial scale and the people of Ireland were appalled at the level of casualties and opinion turned against the war.

Isolated in London, Redmond could not see the political changes that had taken place in Ireland. A new generation of po- litical activists had emerged in the after- math of the Easter Rising. Home Rule within the Empire was no longer accept- able. The demand now was for a thirty- two county Republic, opposition to any form of conscription in Ireland and for a militant opposition to the British presence in Ireland. Redmond's implacable oppo- sition to women's suffrage showed how out

⁶W B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 'Easter 1916', (Macmillan, London, 1951), p. 202.

of touch he was with events in Ireland. His indifference in 1913 to the Lock-out had lost him what little support there was for the Irish Parliamentary party amongst the working class. History had moved beyond Redmond and the compromisers of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Redmond himself died in March 1918 and his body was taken directly to Wexford as the family feared disturbances in Dublin if his funeral cortege passed through the streets of Dublin. In the General Election of December 1918 Sinn Fein swept the country with 47 percent of the vote across the island won all but six of the Nationalist seats.

Legacy

The Irish Parliamentary Party faded from History and the remnants were absorbed into Cumann na nGaedheal and then later the Fine Gael Party which emerged in the 1930s. However, John Redmond's home town of Wexford remained a strongly Redmondite area for decades afterwards. His old seat in Waterford city was won by his son and William Redmond represented the City until his death in 1932.

John Bruton's argument that Redmond provided an alternative to the 1916 Rising just does not stand up to scrutiny. The idea that Redmond offered a less painful and violent road to the same end is false, first because there was absolutely nothing to guarantee that Britain would have honoured its commitments to grant Home Rule after the war, any more than it honoured the commitments it gave to the Arabs when soliciting their support against the Ottoman Empire. Second because his road to Irish independence was far **more** bloody and violent than the road of the Easter Rising. Redmond's road involved

sending Irish workers to fight on behalf of the British Empire in the First World War - a course of action that claimed 49000 Irish lives which was six or seven times the number that died in the Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War put together.

Redmond is deploying a doubtful historical analysis to justify his current political agenda. The 'what if' school of history has no basis in fact nor is it even a useful way to look at history. Even Michael McDowell could see the flaws in Bruton's argument; in an article in the *Sunday Independent* he said that 'we cannot unravel our history or use it for current political aims'.⁷ He went on to suggest that the Americans or any other country that was born out of a revolutionary upheaval don't spend any time questioning the moral basis of those events on the basis that a non-violent outcome may have been possible at some stage in the following hundred years - and neither should we. Karl Marx made the same point over a hundred and fifty years ago: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'⁸ The 1916 Rising would have had a better chance of success if it had been a year later -unfortunately history does not work like that - but we can learn from the past and that is the point of history - next time we will have the lessons of the past to inform our thinking and our actions. And when we look back on those great events it is clear that after 1914 John Redmond had become just a footnote in history and no amount of fantasy masquerading as history by the right-wing establishment can change that fact.

⁷Michael McDowell, *Sunday Independent*, 21 September 2014, p. 23

⁸Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and V.I. Lenin, *On Historical Materialism* (International Publishers, New York, 1974), p. 120.