Chapter Sixty-Two

IRELAND DEPARTS

EVEN at the close of the Victorian age and with an Empire stretching around the globe Britain itself remained a conglomeration of separate countries held in allegiance to the crown. Within the island boundaries of what the Romans had designated Britannia there continued to be strong cultural, religious and linguistic differences which maintained their vigour, giving both Wales and Scotland clear identities which neither Henry VIII's administrative assimilation of Wales in 1536 nor the Act of Union of 1707 with Scotland could eradicate. In the principality of Wales that identity was reflected in the Welsh language and in the strong dissenting tradition of the chapels. Scotland had retained her own separate legal, ecclesiastical and educational traditions. But both were drawn in by other threads whereby the island was held in unity. Men from both countries were advanced to high official positions in the running of the state and of the Empire.The English political system, too, was adopted by both countries. Above all, the landed established classes had intermarried to form a cohesive élite. The Industrial Revolution drew the island even closer together, as new roads and the railways reached out to its furthest boundaries. And that Revolution also brought prosperity, averting a poverty which might have fed movements of independence.

Such should have been the scenario for the island of Ireland but it never happened. The Irish continued to be treated as a subject people upon whom an alien ruling class and religion had been imposed. Unlike the Scottish Act of Union, the Act for Ireland in 1801 brought no benefits. Indeed the reverse was the case, for it took away the Irish Parliament at precisely the period when a strong nationalistic impulse was beginning to flow. Far from stultifying that movement it intensified it. This was a society in which a small Protestant landed minority, often absent, held virtually all the land, which was farmed by a Catholic peasantry with no security of tenure. Tenants could be evicted at will for a higher rent, with no compensation of any kind for the improvements they might have made to the holding. A campaign for the repeal of the 1801 Act had been led by Daniel O'Connell in the 1840s but the British government sent in the army to suppress the movement, arresting O'Connell and the ringleaders.

The repeated use of the military by successive British governments was only to enhance their reputation as an occupying force on an alien people. Then, beginning in 1845, came the successive failures of the potato crop. Potatoes were the staple food of the Irish diet. The appalling famine halved the population either by death or through emigration. From the Irish viewpoint, despite the repeal of the Corn Laws, it seemed that the mainland had abandoned them.

That the situation could be looked upon in this way is hardly surprising for the attitude of the British government was inconsistent, uncertain as to whether to regard and treat Ireland in the same way as Wales and Scotland, or to administer the island as a colony. As a result of this irresolution no coherent policy was ever pursued. It always remained a reactive, as against a proactive, one, a patchy ramshackle affair with legislation too little, too late, and often of an ineffective and inadequate kind. The result was to fuel the movement in Ireland which eventually became that for Home Rule, one which was to reach a crescendo in the twentieth century but which need never have happened if a sustained and co-ordinated policy of reform and integration had been pursued with energy at an earlier date. All along, however, any demand for some kind of self-government was frustrated by those at Westminster who saw it as the prelude to the disintegration of the United Kingdom and Empire.

That this problem was to have such a profound impact on the workings of the British political system was precisely because the Irish MPs sat in the London Parliament. It only needed a leader to emerge who would galvanise them to act as a group for them to be able to paralyse Parliament. And that was precisely what happened when a shrewd and tenacious member of the Protestant Irish élite, Charles Stewart Parnell, entered the House in 1875.

Gladstone had come to power seven years before, stating that his mission was to pacify Ireland. The next year the Church of Ireland was disestablished, thus removing a major source of grievance, the payment by Catholics of the tithe to a Protestant ministry they did not want. The year after came a Land Act, which seemingly offered compensation to tenants unjustly evicted but in fact turned out to be so complicated that it had little impact on halting evictions. Next Gladstone attempted to establish an Irish Catholic university, much to the consternation of the Protestants. His first Irish policy ended in failure. Fatally, he had raised hopes only to dash them.

The demand for self-government grew. In 1879 the Irish Land League was formed, with Parnell as its president. Its aim was to achieve fair rents and security of tenure for tenants, leading eventually to ownership. Parnell was a revolutionary and the Land League joined forces with the nationalist movement called the Fenian Brotherhood. Exacerbated by the agricultural depression of the 1870s protest began

to take active form, leading not only to rent strikes and obstructionism by tenants but worse, arson, outright violence, and assaults on landlords.

This was the situation which greeted Gladstone on his return to office as Prime Minister for a second period in 1880. A second Irish Land Act was passed in the following year with the aim of securing fair rents, freedom of sale and fixity of tenure. Although an achievement, its effect was to emphasise the emerging differences which divided the north from the south of the country. In Ulster, Protestants of a dissenting kind (as against Church of Ireland) formed the majority. In addition, that area of Ireland was the only one to experience the benefits of the Industrial Revolution, which again set it apart from the depressed Catholic agricultural south. Gladstone's Land Act worked well in the north whereas in the south it resulted in a sea of litigation and violence. In spite of its concessions, the Land League headed by Parnell still opposed the Act, and Parnell as a consequence was imprisoned.

Cartoon attacking Gladstone's Land Act of 1881 as a gesture of appeasement to the Land League. Here the League, depicted as a cudgel-wielding thug, threatens the cowering figure of Gladstone.

Then, on 6 May 1881, the new Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish, and the Under-Secretary, were murdered in Phoenix Park in Dublin. Such assassinations led Parnell to disassociate himself from the revolutionaries and found a new association, the National League. The British response to the murders was to pass a strongly coercive Prevention of Crimes Bill, meeting force with force. In this way during the 1880s and 90s polarity, instead of being averted, was accelerated. The terrible agricultural depression meant that half of those who reached the age of maturity emigrated, in the main to the United States where they often prospered but never forgot their tragic origins, sending home funds to finance the independence movement. In this they established a pattern of concern in which the United States

somehow was always to be involved, even to the present day, in any settlement of the Irish question.

What no one had foreseen was that the further reform of the franchise in 1885 meant that the Irish Nationalist MPs led by Parnell were to hold the balance in the Commons and hence were able to dominate the workings of the British Parliament. It was at that moment that Gladstone was converted to the cause of Home Rule, the restoration of an Irish Parliament within the British Empire, which he regarded as a moral necessity. The effect on the Liberal party was catastrophic. It divided it right down the middle, and those who regarded this conversion as an act of betrayal made common cause with the rapidly emerging opponents to such a move in Ulster, known as Unionists. To Unionists in the north, Home Rule came to symbolise the opening prelude to a domination by what they regarded as popery. Gladstone's dramatic conversion paved the way for a political divide over Ireland in which Liberalism became the ally of Irish nationalism and Conservatism that of Ulster unionism.

Nonetheless, in June 1886 Gladstone introduced the first Home Rule Bill for Ireland which was defeated and led to his resignation. He lost the next election and

A contemporary cartoon, *The Scapegoat of the Family*, May 1886. Victoria, labelled as Queen Mother, attended by the countries of the Empire, sadly watches Ireland depart: 'Ireland, with all thy faults I love thee still.'

the new Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, appointed A. J. Balfour as Secretary for Ireland. Although he sped up land sales, Balfour's rule was harsh and coercive, but in fact by encouraging land sales he paved the way for the peaceful demise of the landlord class. Meanwhile the leader of the Irish cause in the House, Parnell, was disgraced. Forged letters implied that he had been cognisant of the Phoenix Park murders, a charge which took two years in the law courts to clear. In 1890, Parnell's long liaison with a married woman, Kitty O'Shea, became public knowledge when her husband cited Parnell as co-respondent in the divorce case. In Victorian England this spelt only one thing for a man in public life, ruin. He died a year later.

Back again in power in 1892 Gladstone tried to pass a second Home Rule Bill, and again failed. By then he had nailed the Liberal party's colours firmly to the mast of Home Rule leading in the long term to the party losing its grassroots support with the English electorate, and becoming instead the voice of the Celtic fringes of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. For years the Liberals remained out of power as a consequence of Ireland, years during which speculation about what would happen should such a bill ever be passed led those in the north to assume an identity based on their Protestant faith, and the belief that their industrial prosperity would be lost if ever the union with Britain was dissolved. One bill, however, was passed by a Conservative government, the Land Purchase Act of 1903. This finally solved the land issue. The government provided long-term, low interest loans to encourage tenants to buy. By the 1920s two thirds of the land had passed into the ownership of the tenants and landlordism had become a thing of the past.

But this still did not give the Irish Home Rule. One great obstacle to achieving that objective was the House of Lords which was solidly against such a motion. To break their power of veto was to open the way for any Liberal government to pass such a bill. And this is what happened. In 1909 the Liberals under Asquith clashed with the Lords, a confrontation which was finally resolved in the Parliament Act of 1911, which stripped the Lords of its right to veto. The passing of that Act was made possible in the Commons through the support of the Irish Nationalist MPs led by John Redmond. Their reward was a Home Rule Bill introduced in May 1912 but which only became law in the year that the First World War broke out. In that Act there was provision, for a limited time, for any area of Ireland which wished to opt out by plebiscite to be able to do so. But the Act was to remain a deadletter while the war was fought.

This final move towards granting Home Rule drew those in the north in Ulster even more closely together with the support and encouragement of Conservative Unionists in England. There were huge public demonstrations and a defence corps

Postcard propaganda about 1912 by the Ulster Unionists with William III on horseback below and, ensconced at the centre above, their leader, the Dublin Tory lawyer, Sir Edward Carson.

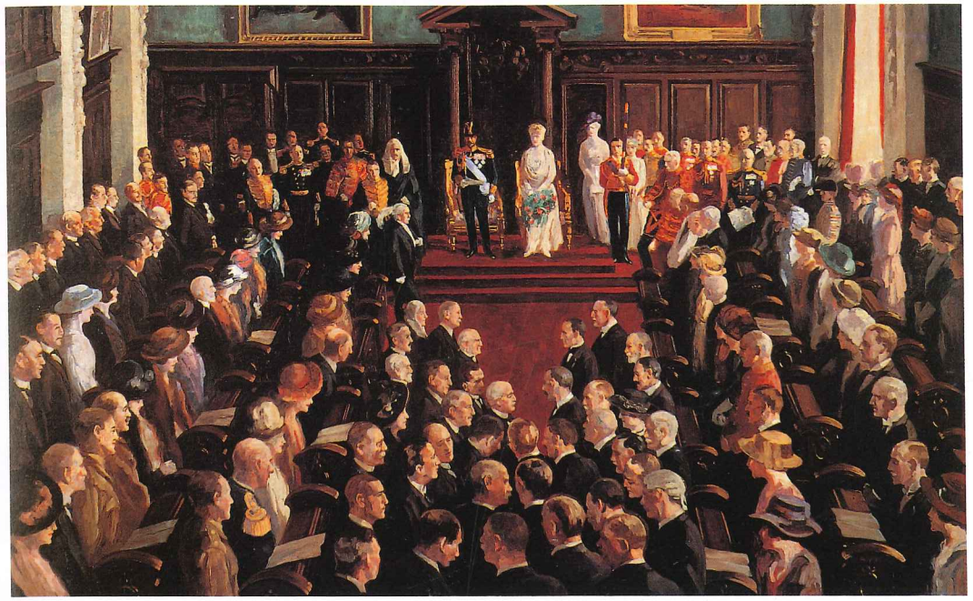
was set up, the Ulster Volunteers. Everything in 1914 indicated that Ireland was drifting towards civil war. Instead the majority of Irish played their part in the massive allied war effort in Europe. But not everyone took that attitude. An Irish nationalist rebel, Roger Casement, opened negotiations with the Germans looking towards an uprising at Easter 1916 against the British government. Casement landed on Good Friday. For a moment it looked as though the uprising might be stillborn but then, on Easter Monday, the nationalists seized the General Post Office in Dublin and proclaimed an Irish Republic. Four days later, with a toll of some four hundred and fifty dead and well over two thousand wounded, they surrendered. Casement and the

main ringleaders were executed. Martial law was imposed. In one ghastly encounter an unbridgeable chasm had been opened between the two islands. The British troops had given the Irish nationalists what they lacked, a potent patriotic mythology and a litany of martyrs to the cause. This was a point of no return.

At the 1918 election, seventy-three Irish MPs led by Éamon de Valera were elected, thirty-four of them men in jail. All of them were members of the republican movement, Sinn Féin ('ourselves'), a political identity created over a decade before in 1905, whose members wanted complete independence for Ireland. That in its turn was a reflection of something else which increased the divide, a Gaelic cultural renaissance whose aim was the de-anglicization of Ireland. The next year, 1919, Sinn Féin won every seat outside Ulster, totally replacing the Irish Nationalists and setting up what was in effect an Irish Parliament (the Dáil) in Dublin, with de Valera as the country's first president. At the same time the old administration remained in place in Dublin Castle, meaning that in effect the country had two governments. The all-too-visible drift towards civil war was accelerated by the creation of an Irish Republican Army, the IRA, which launched a campaign of terrorism against the forces of the established government, the Royal Irish Constabulary, and the soldiers of the British army. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George, authorised the recruitment of irregular contingents of soldiers demobilised from the Great War to meet the crisis. These, known as the 'Black and Tans', indulged in reprisal tactics of a kind which has remained a lasting disgrace to the traditions of the British army.

In September 1920 the British government recognised the inevitable in a Government of Ireland Act. The country was to be split in two, the twenty-six southern Catholic counties and the six northern Protestant ones. Irish MPs were to continue to sit at Westminster but there were to be two other assemblies, one in Dublin and the other in Belfast, with a Council of Ireland linking them. At the election which ensued Sinn Féin won 124 out of the 128 seats and then refused to take them or have anything to do with implementing the Act. Violence broke out, and Lloyd George realised that any attempt to impose the solution by force would mean civil war. By 1921 twenty-six of the southern counties were under martial law.

In July, a cease-fire took place and at the end of the year Ireland was accorded dominion status on a par with Canada as the Irish Free State. It still recognised the sovereignty of the crown. In the spring of 1922 the new constitution came fully into operation with a formal transfer of power from Westminster. The effect was civil war between north and south, with Ulster seceding in the spring of the following year. The Council of Ireland, designed to bring the two sides together on a regular basis, was a deadletter and was abolished in 1925.



The opening of the first Northern Ireland Parliament in June 1921 by King George V. Painted by William Conor, it was not a popular picture as it proved difficult to persuade any of the Members to subscribe to it.

Ireland's history has been one long saga of mismanagement from the mainland. There were moments when it seemed possible that a country whose population was in the main treated as a subject people might have been successfully drawn into the system in the same way as Scotland and Wales, both of which also had strong religious and cultural differences from England. That that never happened was a major failure of initiative by a succession of governments, especially during the Victorian period, all of which never came to grips with the fundamental problems of the country. Although Ireland was never part of Britain it had been one part of what is designated the United Kingdom. A section of that had now gone, fuelling separatist tendencies on the mainland. In 1925 Plaid Cymru (the party of Wales) was formed, promoting the Welsh language and calling for self-government, along with a radical social and economic programme. Three years later a Scottish National party was set up demanding likewise self-government for north of the border. Neither of these were to have any significant impact but they were to remain irksome and salutary reminders to those at the centre that Britain was an alliance, rather than a union, of countries. In the case of Ireland dominion status was to prove a half-way house. The advent of the Irish Free State, however, succeeded in papering over for a time what were the all-too-visible cracks beneath the surface.