Introduction: Ireland 1880–2016: Negotiating Sovereignty and Freedom

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Introduction

By the late 1870s the effects of the Great Famine seemed to have worked themselves through the structure of the Irish economy and the fabric of Irish society. The drastic demographic check (of 1845–1855) had settled into what would remain an enduring pattern until the 1960s, with emigration rates generally outstripping the natural rate of population growth, resulting in a continuous population decline that was unique in Europe. Moreover, the high portion of the young and single in the emigrant outflow strengthened the conservative bias in many areas of Irish social and cultural life.[1]

The structure of the Irish economy had also taken firm shape. The balance of Irish agriculture (the bedrock of the economy) had shifted decisively towards grassland production. The range of successful, export-orientated manufacturing output was narrow and agri-related, with beer, whiskey, biscuits and a few niche luxury products prominent; otherwise, the manufacturing dispersed throughout the urban centres of the south and west was principally serving local demand. The commercial role of Dublin was important (as principal hub of trade with Britain and of wholesale distribution countrywide), with lesser port towns serving a similar role more locally. The underlying trends were clear: Ireland was firmly embedded in an increasingly integrated UK economy, with a well-developed communications system, and with rising literacy, as the adoption of English (and the abandonment of Irish) as the main vernacular advanced irreversibly.[2] The major exception to this profile was the north-east corner of Ulster, an expanding industrial enclave, based, from the mid-nineteenth century, on shipbuilding and a cluster of related industries that eclipsed linen as the mainstay of a local industrial zone

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1 J. J. Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848–1918* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1973), 1–35.
2 C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland. A New Economic History 1780–1939* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 213–376.

that saw Belfast become the only recognisably industrial Victorian British city in Ireland.

By 1880 the Catholic Church in Ireland was reaching a position of remarkable cultural dominance over much of the country. An increasingly confident Catholic bourgeoisie, in town and country, fortified in its social and cultural influence by the thinning out through the Famine and post-Famine emigration of the rural underclass, supported the authority of an expanding establishment of religious personnel and institutional infrastructure (schools and health facilities as well as places of worship). The rich associational culture generated by this Catholic community was marked by a growing insistence on conformity, not only in relation to church teaching and religious observance, but also in social mores and behaviour. Its confidence was also the confidence of a missionary church, expanding throughout the Anglophone world.[3]

In Ulster, evangelical Protestant revivalism from the 1850s produced a heightened religious sense that rivalled the Catholic version. Allowing for clear distinctions between the Presbyterian and the Episcopal communities (in theology and devotional practice, and also in social and cultural life), the more fundamental cleavage was between Catholic and Protestant, running 'to a greater or lesser extent' through all spheres of social life.[4]

The extent to which Ireland seemed increasingly securely integrated into the British state and empire is striking. The economies of both islands were fully integrated. The pull of cultural integration was strong. A centrally administered system of elementary education resulted in rising levels of literacy in English. The Protestant hold on the higher reaches of the Irish administration remained strong (fuelling resentment among educated Catholics), but throughout the British Empire there were few impediments to profitable employment for ambitious Irish people in search of a career – in the army, civil service, professions, the stage and journalism, domestic service, nursing, and, at the lower end of the scale, the unskilled.[5]

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3 P. Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience: A Historical Survey* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1985), 192–258; D. W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland, 1898–1921* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973).

4 B. M. Walker, *Ulster Politics: The Formative Years, 1868–1886* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1989); for the contested world of sport, see P. Rouse, *Sport and Ireland: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 149–242.

5 On Catholic social mobility pre-1914, see S. Pašeta, *Before the Revolution: Nationalism, Social Change and Ireland's Catholic Elite, 1879–1922* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999); F. Campbell, *The Irish Establishment 1879–1914* (Oxford University Press, 2009); also, K. Jeffery (ed.), *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

The closing years of the nineteenth century saw a strong reaction against this seemingly inexorable 'assimilationist' trend in Irish life. Across a broad cultural front – language, literature, arts and crafts, sport and, ultimately, politics – a cohort of activists stirred to challenge what they denounced as provincial and derivative and to advocate the cultivation of native (indigenous, authentic, Irish) cultural modes. Arnoldian Celticism and dollops of anti-modernist romanticism were strong ingredients. The anti-colonialist impulse – resentment at condescension – featured in the writings and propaganda of many of the challenging collectivity of cultural activists who produced a bumper crop of ideas, organisations and cultural works in the decades from 1880 to the eve of the Great War. Creativity, self-confidence and self-respect were watchwords of all the revivalist groups – against passivity, slack imitation and low self-esteem.[6]

Home Rule and its Critics

There is a sense in which a demand for some form of self-government may seem the natural political corollary of this broad wave of activism for confident, creative national development along 'Irish lines'. But the wave of cultural revivalism may also be read as a critique of the inadequacy or incompleteness of the demand for 'Home Rule', articulated as a claim for the restoration of the rights of an 'historic Irish nation', even as the remaining marks of distinct nationhood were being eroded and abandoned apace. This was the argument of Douglas Hyde and the Gaelic League and of the propagandists of the Irish-Ireland movement. But it also reflected an instinct of many cultural activists (whatever their position on the political or constitutional issue) that Catholicism should not be the default, defining characteristic of 'Irishness'.[7]

The solid electoral support for Home Rule (more than 80 per cent of the Irish parliamentary seats at all general elections in Ireland from 1885 to 1910) was a strong indication of general nationalist sentiment rather than

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6 P. J. Mathews, *Revival: the Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement* (Cork: Cork University Press for Field Day, 2003); R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014); D. Kiberd and P. J. Mathews (eds.), *Handbook of the Irish Revival: An Anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writings 1891–1922* (Dublin: Abbey Theatre Press, 2015).

7 Mathews, *op.cit.;* also T. G. McMahon, *Grand Opportunity. The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society, 1893–1910* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

a stated preference for a specific constitutional formula. As Conor Cruise O'Brien perceptively remarked:

> The Irish electorate which voted for Home Rule did not consist of men who, having considered all possible constitutions for Ireland, decided that autonomy within the empire was the best solution. It consisted of men who wanted independence, who were assured by men whom they trusted that Home Rule was the best they could get, and re-assured, by the opposition of men whom they disliked, that Home Rule must be worth having. If the Unionist Ascendancy said that Home Rule was trafficking with treason and marching through rapine to the disintegration of the Empire, then Home Rule sounded all right.[8]

Likewise, it may be said that Irish unionist sentiment (especially in Ulster) clearly encompassed rational fears regarding what an Irish legislature with even limited powers might become – a stepping stone to a separatist Irish state with a triumphant Catholic majority and an inclination towards economic interventions (e.g., protectionist measures) that would jeopardise the economic prosperity of Ireland's few major exporting manufacturers, and, in particular, of east Ulster's industrial enclave. Moreover, unionist anxiety that Home Rule would be the harbinger of Rome rule had a rational basis, given the rise of ultramontanism and the visible evidence of Irish episcopal ambitions in, for example, the sphere of education. But Ulster unionist sentiment also reflected a more visceral anti-Catholicism, on theological grounds, but also on grounds of conscience, ethno-cultural historical fears and prejudices, seasoned with an ingrained colonial-settler sense of cultural superiority. With the progressive Ulsterisation of unionist militancy and resistance to Home Rule from the early twentieth century, this deep-seated instinct became crucial in mobilising popular Protestant opinion.[9]

Varieties of nationalism, socialism and (principally through the suffrage issue) early feminism – singly or in combination – provided the ideological passion for the Irish revolutionary 'generation of 1914', dedicated to achieving personal freedom and creating the 'good society'.[10] Self-help, creativity and innovation were their watchwords. Thus, in an Irish context, the 'vivid faces'

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8 C. Cruise O'Brien (ed.), *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 2.

9 A. Jackson, *The Ulster Party. Irish Unionists in the House of Commons, 1884–1911* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); P. Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism 1912–1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1994), 1–70.

10 R. Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980); For an Irish family portrait, see D. McMahon (ed.), *The Moynihan Brothers in Peace and War 1909–1918: Their New Ireland* (Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2004).

open to the prospect of revolution (and active in organisations dedicated to radical, if not necessarily revolutionary, change in the cultural and political disposition of the country) were to be found in the Gaelic League, in literary and drama circles and in a host of more explicitly political causes and campaigns, as well as in suffragist, trade union and philanthropic organisations and activities.[11] Poets, artists, intellectuals and journalists featured prominently, but they were not the whole story of an impatient national revivalism. A rising cohort of the educated lower middle class anxious to 'move up' and a cadre of local leaders formed in the land struggles of 1879–1886, in the councils of the Gaelic Athletic Association, and, after 1899, in elected local government bodies, constituted its vital sinews.[12]

Yet, for all this energy and the profusion of ideas and talents, the commanding heights of not only the political but also the economic and social landscape of Edwardian Ireland were firmly held by the respectable bourgeois property-owners, in all parts of the island and among all denominations. The success of the Land League – the Land Acts of 1881–1906 leading to peasant-proprietorship – provided a solid foundation for an essentially conservative rural society, with a bourgeois leadership integrating comfortable farmers, shopkeepers, merchants, professions, commercial interests, journalists and clergy.[13] Land-hungry smallholders and the shrinking army of landless labourers could do little but swell the emigrant ranks or wait on ameliorative measures from the government or the church. There were, however, competing voices and visions. A whiff of Jacobinism clung to the clandestine Fenians. More robustly, on the left, the new trade unionism among the unskilled and the socialist message had gained a promising foothold within elements of the Irish working classes by the early twentieth century.[14]

And yet, the Catholic bourgeoisie was the dominant social formation for which the Home Rule party was the natural political vehicle. It stood for a firm commitment to constitutional politics, with a dash of literary Fenianism in its rhetoric, and an essentially conservative position on property, law and order, and social attitudes and behaviour. For all the personal rivalries and rancour that bedeviled the ranks of the Irish parliamentarians at Westminster

11 Foster, *op. cit.*, particularly 31–177.
12 *Ibid.* Also, T. Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland 1858–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); P. Maume, *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life 1891–1918* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999).
13 For the classic account of the 'challenging collectivity', see S. Clark, *Social Origins of the Irish Land War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).
14 D. Nevin (ed.), *Trade Union Century* (Cork and Dublin: Mercier Press, 1994); E. O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland, 1917–23* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1988).

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(and among their supporters at home) there was a powerful imperative to keeping the 'politics of community' dominant, rather than allowing more divisive issues (notably class, but also other 'divisive' issues, such as women's suffrage) to intrude.[15]

The exception to this general profile was Ulster. Ulster was not uniformly different to the other provinces in its ethno-religious profile: Ulster's distinction was that it was in religious identities a more evenly divided province (44 per cent Catholic, 53 per cent Protestant in 1911). Communal politics were also paramount here, and the Protestant tenant farmers in Ulster were no less purposeful than those elsewhere during the land agitation in demanding the best deal available for themselves. But from the emergence of Home Rule, and certainly from its Parnellite triumph in the 1880s, two distinct communities, with opposing political positions, hardened and moved progressively into two mutually exclusive and totalising narratives of identity and political objective.

The associational culture – and not only through the Orange Order membership and the Catholic Ancient Order of Hibernians, but also direct church-centred religious and social practice – reinforced the underlying reality of two distinct confessional communities. In areas where economic competition or congested urban settlement and dislocation were most marked, confessional division sometimes descended into sectarian conflict. The Protestant bourgeoisie had, through the Orange and other loyal orders, a mechanism for ensuring the primacy of 'community' politics over alternative sirens of identity or interests. The 'politics of community' would endure, indeed solidify, proving resistant to sporadic challenges from cross-community, class-based initiatives and interventions, and comfortably keeping mainstream trade union-based or political labour firmly in its subordinate place into the post-1922 decades.[16]

Cultural and civic activism with a cross-community dimension was not entirely absent in Ulster.[17] But from at least the turn of the century the

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15 For the continuing disruptive force of agrarian radicalism (notably land redistribution), see P. Bew, *Conflict and Conciliation in Ireland 1890–1910: Parnellites and Radical Agrarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); F. Campbell, *Land and Revolution: Nationalist Politics in the West of Ireland 1891–1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

16 For a detailed examination of early tensions, see H. Patterson, *Class Conflict and Sectarianism: The Protestant Working-class and the Belfast Labour Movement, 1868–1920* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1980).

17 For Protestant interest in the Gaelic Revival, see J. Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), 419–23; also D. Ó Doibhlin (ed.), *Duanaire Gaedhilge Róis Ní Ógáin* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1995).

political polarisation that saw the strengthening of a distinct Ulster union-ist voice (distinct, that is, from the more dispersed southern unionists), was reflected in every sphere of life. Its early institutional forms anticipated the later partition realities. Thus, when Irish university education was reconfig-ured (from the old Royal University) in 1908, the new structure established a National University of Ireland with constituent colleges in Cork, Dublin (the old Catholic University) and Galway: but in Belfast, the stand-alone university was titled the Queen's University, Belfast.[18] If the Catholic bourgeoisie was the dominant element within the nationalist front, from 1905 the more asser-tive Ulster Protestant bourgeoisie took the initiative within Ulster unionism from the older landed leadership, intent on forging communal solidarity and harnessing to effective political purpose the more elemental sectarian pas-sions of 'the Orange street'.[19]

The Impact of the Great War, and its Aftermath

The introduction of the third Home Rule Bill in 1912 precipitated a succes-sion of political (and in time, military) shocks in Ireland that would last until 1923. The militarisation of political and, briefly in Dublin, industrial confron-tation happened quickly, with the founding of the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Citizen Army and the Irish Volunteers, all established during 1913. All were established with a declared defensive purpose. However, in common with a surging wave of militarisation across the continent of Europe (whether through state-controlled armies or an assortment of embryonic revolution-ary militias), the Irish volunteers were enthused by much heady rhetoric on the pure nobility of manly soldiering, and a corresponding contempt for the trimming and trading of the politics of persuasion and compromise, charac-teristic of representative parliamentary government.[20]

This surging wave crested in 1914. The outbreak of war transformed the political landscape in Ireland. It allowed the intractable problem of Ulster to be deferred until the war's end, and it provided the opening for both Redmond and Carson to establish firm *bona fides* for their preferred (if clearly

18 T. Dunne (ed.), *The National University of Ireland 1908–2008* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008); T. W. Moody and J. C. Beckett, *Queen's Belfast 1845–1949: The History of a University* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).
19 A. Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 215–44; T. Bowman, *Carson's Army: The Ulster Volunteer Force 1910–1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
20 See Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 221–57.

incompatible) solutions to the impasse; by urging their respective volunteer corps to join the war effort. However, for all Redmond's authority he faced opposition: a minority voice, but a vital one. A cluster of anti-recruitment groups openly campaigned against the war. Not all of these were pacifists. The socialists led by Connolly opposed a capitalist war between rival greedy empires and called for international solidarity between the working classes in resisting war. And the clandestine Irish republican movement – the Irish Republican Brotherhood – on both sides of the Atlantic was intent, as its revolutionary credo decreed, on using the war (and 'England's difficulty') as Ireland's opportunity to stage an armed revolt against British rule and to establish an Irish republic by force of arms.

The 1916 Rising was a relatively minor military episode, with fatalities no higher than 470 (the majority, civilians). However, the British response to the Rising was the trigger for a decisive shift in public opinion among the nationalist population, a shift on which the leaders of the Rising had gambled. The execution of fifteen of the leaders and the arrest of more than 3,500 others, many of whom had been active in cultural nationalist movements but had no connection with the Rising, had a significant impact on public opinion. As details of the lives (and bearing in death) of the rebel leaders became known, admiration for their ideals and character, if not yet retrospective approval of their actions, spread widely.[21]

The British mistakenly named the Rising a 'Sinn Féin' rebellion, thereby ensuring that 'Sinn Féin' now became a flag of convenience for all advanced nationalists who were prepared to praise the courage and ideals of the 1916 leaders and endorse the separatist cause for which they died. The end of 1917 (with the return of the interned prisoners and a new burst of organising) saw the launch of a reorganised Sinn Féin, with the surviving Rising commandant, Éamon de Valera, as president. The resurgent Sinn Féin placed itself at the head of the pan-nationalist opposition to the threat of conscription in Ireland during 1918. But the nationalist demand for 'self-determination', bought in blood by the 1916 sacrifice, had now moved on from Home Rule; for some, it had now moved to a non-negotiable republic.[22]

Ulster unionists had also paid heavily in blood for their devotion to empire and the cause of the Union, notably at the Somme in July 1916. They were no more accommodating regarding Home Rule in late 1916 or during 1917 than

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21 On the Rising, see C. Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London: Allen Lane, 2005); F. McGarry, *The Rising. Ireland: Easter 1916* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
22 M. Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland. The Sinn Féin Party 1916–1923* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

they had been during 1913–1914. The war years polarised further nationalist and Ulster unionist positions. With the general election at the end of 1918, under an enlarged electorate, the victory of Sinn Féin throughout most of nationalist Ireland set the bar high for the constitutional status of the Irish national state that was now being demanded. However, the Ulster unionists, with a majority of the seats in Ulster, were no less firm in their resolve to remain within the union. Some form of partition settlement was now inevitable. The issue, as indeed it had been since 1913, was its territorial extent and the duration of 'Ulster's' exclusion from an Irish Home Rule state.[23]

In January 1919, the inaugural meeting of the secessionist assembly (Dáil Éireann) in Dublin, attended by elected Sinn Féin deputies, reaffirmed the already declared Irish Republic, established a rival apparatus of government, and sent delegates to seek recognition of the Irish State at the peace talks in Paris. The opening of the Dáil was also accompanied by the first military action against crown forces (a few policemen) by the reconstituted Irish Volunteers (or Irish Republican Army – IRA as it became known). The War of Independence (1919–1921) was a guerilla campaign, prosecuted unevenly across limited areas of the country by IRA volunteers against crown forces. It was not a war that lent itself to a decisive victory for either side. The political pressures to find a solution were considerable, on both sides. Public opinion at home and abroad (notably in the United States and the dominions, where constituencies of the Irish diaspora were exercised by events in the homeland) pressed the British government to reach an accommodation. The IRA capacity to fight was not inexhaustible.[24] The elected Dáil may have succeeded in raising finance and maintaining a rudimentary apparatus of public administration and justice, but it was a constant challenge for it to gain the unequivocal recognition of its authority from the military leadership of the IRA. Moreover, given the nature of the guerilla campaign in the unsettled conditions of 1919–1921, the military leadership enjoyed primacy of authority over the political. In fact, for a solid core of die-hard republicans, the vesting of ultimate authority in the army command was the only cast-iron protection of the republic against backsliding by compromising politicians.[25] This

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23 *Idem.*, *The Partition of Ireland, 1911–1925* (Dundalk: Dublin Historical Association, 1983).

24 The revolutionary years are best covered in C. Townshend, *The Republic. The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); D. Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913–1923* (London: Profile Books, 2015); P. Hart, *The I.R.A. at War 1916–1923* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

25 For close study of military/civilian tension, see T. Garvin, *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996).

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suspicion of the tribe of politicians was not unique to militant Irish republicans in the aftermath of the Great War, nor would it be confined to the short revolutionary interval of 1919–1921. On the contrary, the tortuous issue of the relationship of the army of the republic (the IRA) to the evolving (and democratically endorsed) structures of Irish government after 1922, would cast a long shadow on Irish politics and insurrectionary action for the rest of the century.[26]

If the establishment of an Irish Free State represented the best that could be wrested from Britain in 1921, it was clearly, in territorial extent and constitutional status, considerably less than the Irish republic for which the martyrs of 1916 had died. Yet, when Civil War erupted in 1922/23 it was not (as was feared and highly possible during 1913–1916) a military conflict between armed UVF and armed Irish Volunteers, but a split within Sinn Féin and the IRA on the constitutional status of the Irish national 'state' to be established as a result of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Partition scarcely featured in the bitter Dáil debate on the Treaty. The British government had already taken what would prove to be the decisive step in resolving the 'Ulster Question' left over from the autumn of 1914, with the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, establishing two subsidiary 'Home Rule' parliaments (with limited devolved functions under Westminster control) in Ireland; one in Belfast for six counties in Ulster and the other in Dublin for the remaining 26 counties. The offer fell well short of the minimum the Sinn Féin-controlled Dáil would accept (to say nothing of republican militants in the IRA leadership). In July 1921 a truce opened the way for the negotiations that would conclude with the Treaty of December 1921 and the establishment of a 26-county Irish Free State with dominion status.

So far as the issue of Partition was concerned, by the end of 1921 the bird had flown. The Ulster Unionists maximised the territory they could take, consistent with a secure, permanent majority for unionist dominance, and established in Belfast the devolved administration provided for in the 1920 Act. The priority was security, not only against the external 'threat', but, more urgently, security against the enemy within. This enemy was, in effect, the Catholic, nationalist minority (about a third of the population), lodged

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26 For historical context, see M. Mulholland, 'Political Violence', in R. Bourke and Ian McBride (eds.), *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 382–402; for the republican mindset, see R. W. White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh: The Life and Politics of an Irish Revolutionary* (Indianapolis, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2006).