

**Strictly embargoed 15:00 hrs**

**17 September 2021**

**Historical Reflections on the Northern Ireland Centenary by Professor Ian McBride, Forster Professor of Irish History at Oxford University at the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's (PCI) Union Theological College, Belfast, during 'On these steps', PCI's special event to mark the role played by its College in hosting the Northern Ireland Parliament 100 years ago, and to mark the centenary of the creation of Northern Ireland, and the partition of Ireland.**

How can we find constructive ways of commemorating the creation of Northern Ireland one hundred years ago? There is no easy answer to this question. The partition of Ireland was a flawed attempt to reconcile the aspirations of Unionists and Nationalists. The responsibility for its failures lies with decision-makers in Belfast, in London and, to some extent, in Dublin also.

In many respects the constitutional settlement of 1920-22 was the antithesis of the peace process of the 1990s. It was the outcome of violence and the threat of violence. When the Northern Ireland parliament was inaugurated in June 1921, and when MPs convened in the Gamble Library on 20 September 1921, the backdrop was grim: guerrilla warfare and state reprisals in the South, vicious intercommunal rioting and sectarian assassinations in the North. A century ago, neither Unionists nor Nationalists were capable of recognising the legitimacy of each other's political allegiances. Each regarded the historical and cultural traditions of the other as invalid. The legacy of violent confrontation and political polarization poisoned the new political structures established in 1921.

President Higgins recently urged that the organising principle in Irish commemorations should be 'a hospitality of narratives' – a phrase borrowed from the philosopher Richard Kearney, which calls for an openness to different stories and different perspectives on our historical experience. But hospitality comes more easily to societies that feel at home with themselves; it requires hard work in the North, where neither community feels that its right to belong can be taken for granted.

In the South – for the most part – the decade of centenaries has been a remarkably positive and productive process. The period between the Queen’s visit and the UK’s referendum on EU membership constituted an unusually auspicious moment for the Irish government to acknowledge the diversity of Irish allegiances during the First World War whilst simultaneously affirming the value of its own revolutionary origins in the Easter Rising of 1916. The guiding precepts of the centenary commemoration were entirely laudable: historical accuracy, mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation. This spirit was displayed, to take just one example, in the ‘Remembrance Wall’ at Glasnevin cemetery – where the names of all those who died were recorded, irrespective of their background or their political allegiance.

But this latitude reflects decades of consensus about the basic shape and structure of the state. The political scientist John Coakley observed twenty years ago that nationalism in the South was no longer Catholic or communal in character; that a new form of state patriotism had emerged, comfortable with the political and territorial framework of a 26-county Ireland. In the years before 2016, Irish political issues, most notably the referendum on marriage equality, were only tangentially related to the Irish revolution of 1916-22. Consequently, the aim of the centenary – in the words of the Expert Advisory Group – was ‘to broaden sympathies, without having to abandon loyalties’. At the same time, the Group also acknowledged that ‘the state cannot be expected to be neutral about the events that led to its formation’. This balancing act is not possible north of the border. Northern Ireland revisits its origins at a time when Brexit has reopened the question of constitutional change, a question that in 2016 had largely gone away.

There is the deeper obstacle, moreover, that Northern Ireland was not designed as a joint endeavour. Partition was imposed on one community in Northern Ireland to satisfy the demands of the other. The contours of the border reflect the balance of power in 1921 rather than the niceties of demography. So the centenary unavoidably serves as a reminder to northern nationalists of the decades of disempowerment that followed. A hundred years later, the task of reconceiving Northern Ireland as a shared political space still challenges political imaginations as well as political wills.

### **The Boundary Question**

On 3 December 1925 Winston Churchill told the British House of Commons: ‘The Irish question will only be settled when the human question is settled.’ On that day the tripartite agreement between the three governments of the United Kingdom, the Irish Free State, and Northern Ireland was announced, revoking the powers of the Boundary Commission and confirming the existing border of Northern Ireland. Churchill’s cryptic aphorism comes to mind because it encapsulates an important truth: the partition of Ireland was not an anachronism or an anomaly in the Europe that emerged from the cataclysms of the First World War, but part of a very modern political dilemma. The intractability of the Irish question was just one example of the problems created by the rise of nationalism as a global force – by the dangerous fantasy that each sovereign state must be the political embodiment of a homogeneous national population.

One useful function of historians is to remind us that our predicaments are rarely as unique as we think. The unprecedented strains created by the Great War not only split apart the union of Britain and Ireland; they also brought about the collapse of the great continental empires ruled over for centuries by the Hapsburgs, the Romanovs and the Ottomans. In the years between 1919 and 1923 the European political landscape was fundamentally reorganised. The new states of Poland and Czechoslovakia were established, Romania was enlarged, the Saar basin in Germany and the Baltic port of Danzig were internationalised, and the area around Smyrna (modern Izmir) was awarded to the Greeks. In all these cases, as in Ireland, the wishes of the inhabitants collided with strategic interests and with local political and economic circumstances. The European historian Mark Mazower reminds us that the Paris peace settlement of 1919-1923 granted sixty million people a state of their own; but it also turned 25 million people into ‘minorities’.

Two contrasts stand out. First, the level and character of violence in the Irish case was relatively low and restrained. Tim Wilson's 2010 book *Frontiers of Violence* presents a magisterial comparison of Ulster with Upper Silesia, the industrialised borderland between Germany and Poland, which was also partitioned in the aftermath of the First World War. Between 1918 and 1922 the number of violent deaths was, in proportion to their populations, three times greater in Upper Silesia: an estimated 2,824 fatalities as compared with 714 in Ulster.

An examination of population displacement reinforces the point. The number of northern Nationalists fleeing south, or to British cities, and of southern Unionists quitting Ireland, amounted to tens of thousands. Their stories have been forgotten; although such migration, sometimes forced, clearly altered the demographic make-up of both islands. These movements were dwarfed, however, by the population exchange of 1.5 million people between Greece and Turkey agreed by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. The crucial feature of the Irish case was that whereas its rivals had been defeated, and their empires dismantled, the British empire had emerged from the European war as the only financial and naval power that could rival the United States. Ireland had been sheltered from the total war that swept away political institutions and destroyed economic life on the European mainland. In the aftermath of the Great War Lloyd George was a key player in redrawing the political map of eastern Europe and the Middle East; no other government was in a position to interfere with his negotiations with Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionists. The issue of the partition of Ireland was never internationalised.

The other stabilising factor operating in the 1920s was hardly more edifying. On both sides of the border the dominant political factions, fortified by emergency legislation and by a swollen security apparatus, found the consolidation of power over their respective territories more than adequate compensation for having to rescale their political ambitions. The UVF gunrunner and zealot Fred Crawford produced a leaflet in 1920 entitled *Why I Voted for the Six Counties*, dismissing the protestations of his fellow loyalists and covenanters in Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan. Ireland was a sinking ship, he retorted, and the hard truth was that there was not enough room for all Ulster Protestants on the lifeboat. Southerners could be similarly unsentimental about abandoning their co-religionists to the tyranny of the northern majority. When the boundary commission collapsed in 1925, without delivering the expected revision of the border, the republican activist Liam de Róiste noted the indifference of public opinion in his native Cork. The issue of the boundary, he remarked, 'does not enter into our lives in the South'.

### **Democracy and Dynamite**

The right to self-determination was the most famous phrase to emerge from the post-war settlement. It has subsequently been enshrined in UN declarations as an essential condition for the observance of human rights. It is a fundamental concept in the Good Friday Agreement. To Woodrow Wilson it meant simply government by consent. But, while the US president claimed that self-determination would make the world 'safe for democracy', his secretary of state, Robert Lansing, worried that this new concept was 'loaded with dynamite'. Historians, political scientists and international lawyers have tended to agree, because the doctrine of self-determination raises more questions than it answers. Before the people determine their own future, someone must first determine who the people are. What territorial boundaries are they entitled to claim as their own? What happens when peoples overlap, where one community's claim to self-government becomes entangled with another?

Historians have sometimes presented partition as a case study of how physical force can prevail over democracy. But this view is deceptively simple. The actions of Unionists, nationalists and republicans were always constrained by their ability to appeal to established principles of legitimacy – not only principles that resonated with their followers at home but those accepted by international opinion. The real issue was not between those who accepted democratic values and those who rejected them. It was an argument about the application of democracy in a divided society.

Sinn Fein claimed that Ireland had a right to nationhood because of its historical continuity, its continuous resistance to British rule, and above all its distinctive cultural personality. Arthur Griffith protested in 1920 that self-determination was a matter for nations and peoples, not for mere ‘parishes and shires’ (i.e. for the six counties). De Valera said that giving self-determination to the six counties was to reduce the doctrine to a ‘tribalistic’ level. The Ulster Protestants were historically, culturally and racially Irish, and they would realise this fact once the lies of British imperialists or Belfast capitalists were exposed. When

de Valera addressed President Wilson in 1918 he explained that ‘the people of Ireland constitute a distinct and separate nation, ethnically, historically, and tested by every standard of political science’. None of the new states – Czechoslovakia, Finland, even Poland could ‘even approach the *perfection of nationhood* manifested by Ireland’. Ireland had exercised sovereign powers for a thousand years before the invasion of the Danes, he boasted. The Irish nation was ‘as homogeneous as any nation upon the earth’. A free Ireland, he asserted without further elaboration, would easily deal with ‘its minority problem’.

A survey of just over 300 Protestant clergymen carried out by the *Daily Mail* in 1912 provides a valuable insight into the mindset of that minority. Fifty-four percent feared for the security of their religion under home rule. It is well-known that Presbyterians in particular were anxious about the *Ne Temere* decree which declared ‘mixed’ marriages null and void unless solemnised by a Catholic priest.

The Rev. David Mitchell of Warrenpoint, incidentally the brother of the republican John Mitchell, believed that home rule would inevitably ‘lead to the ascendancy of a system always hostile to freedom and toleration’. Forty-two percent protested that Ulster’s industrial economy would be destroyed; nineteen per cent warned that home rule would disrupt the empire; fifteen percent that it would lead to civil war. What is less well-known is that these concerns resonated with a large body of opinion in Britain, particularly, but not exclusively, in the northern industrial cities, as an important recent book by Daniel Jackson has established.

Sympathy for Ulster Protestants also existed in the West Country, where the nonconformist churches were strong. This, I think, explains the otherwise mysterious fact that it was the obscure Cornish MP Thomas Agar-Robartes who first proposed that four counties – Antrim, Down, Londonderry and Armagh – should be excluded from home rule in June 1912. The Agar-Robartes amendment was the first time the idea of partition was proposed at Westminster.

The underlying Unionist argument was that the Irish did not form a single national unit, but two antagonistic populations separated by religion, ethnic origin, and political loyalties. As the Ulster Liberal (and prominent Presbyterian) Thomas Sinclair put it: ‘There is no national Irish demand for Home Rule, because there never has been and there is no homogeneous Irish nation.’ In August 1918 Edward Carson published his own letter to President Wilson, protesting that Ulstermen remained as devoted to the cause of democratic freedom as their eighteenth-century forefathers. Nationalists were welcome to home rule, provided that the Ulster Protestants were left alone. In rejecting this compromise, Carson complained, nationalists were revealed that their goal was not simply self-government for themselves, but a ‘coercive domination over us’. Democracy did not offer a peaceful solution to the Ulster conflict so much as to equip the belligerents with a new arsenal of ultra-modern weaponry.

## **A Rock of Granite**

Northern Ireland was founded upon a double standard. In 1912 Unionists argued that, under Irish home rule, Protestants would be radically disadvantaged. The settlement of 1921 reversed that objection rather than resolving it. Britain awarded to the Unionists the maximum area they could effectively control. Little attempt was made to counter-balance Unionist majority rule with protections for the minority. But if there could be no justice in an Ireland where Protestants were outnumbered by 3:1, how could there be justice in a six-county Ulster where Catholics were outnumbered by 2:1?

During the treaty negotiations, James Craig reassured his followers that ‘Ulster was not a piece of cheese to be nibbled at; it was a rock of granite that would break the teeth’ of mice like Sinn Fein. The illogicality of the six-county border was highlighted in *Ulster and Home Rule: No partition of Ulster*, a pamphlet issued by the Unionist delegates of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan in April 1920. If the three border counties were to be omitted because of their nationalist majorities, they demanded, then what about Fermanagh and Tyrone? What about Derry City, South Armagh, South Down? Twenty-one local authorities in these nationalist areas swore allegiance to Dáil Éireann.

In Derry, where the Nationalist council refused to recognise the Belfast parliament, the creation of Craig’s rock of granite required that 2,000 British troops be despatched to police a population of 50,000 people. The imposition of the border was therefore experienced as a kind of conquest by many of the communities living along the new international boundary. With the threat of the boundary commission hanging over him, and the possibility that its report would recommend the transfer of blocs of territory to the Free State, Craig agreed to the redrawing of local electoral boundaries – gerrymandering – initially as a temporary deviation. Although the Unionist leader won five general elections with large majorities he failed to articulate a strategy for healing the communal divisions that would eventually overwhelm the parliament he had created.



During the Stormont years Ulster Unionists were allowed to treat Northern Ireland as their own exclusive property. It was *their* creation, and it existed to protect the values that were specific to them: the survival of the Protestant religion, loyalty to the crown, the British way of life. The assumption was that Northern Ireland – or as they generally preferred to call it, ‘Ulster’ – had a single unitary personality with its own distinct history. When Craig remarked that Richard Dawson Bates ‘knew the mind of Ulster better than almost anyone else’ he unthinkingly conformed to the standard rhetorical practice of Unionists which assumed Catholics and nationalists, at least for political purposes, did not really exist.

### **Conclusion**

In the decade before 1921 the risk of a civil war in Ireland was taken seriously. The political and social forces working in favour of partition were very powerful. Nobody had a coherent or an obviously workable alternative. In this brief talk I have tried to sketch out some of the conflicting forces that shaped Northern Ireland. Unionists remained stubbornly blind to the logic of their own argument: for if home rule was wrong for a divided Ireland, as they insisted, it was surely wrong for a divided ‘Ulster’ too. Nationalists and republicans continued to dismiss Ulster Unionism as a phantom created by British imperialists and Belfast industrialists – it was ‘purely a product of British party manoeuvring’ – to use de Valera’s words. There was no glimmer of a ‘hospitality of narratives’ in the 1920s and ’30s, nor for many decades to come.

British politicians exhibited their own varieties of myopia and self-delusion. The driving force here was not imperialism, although London naturally sought to protect its geopolitical interests. If anything, the creation of Northern Ireland reflected a kind of psychological decolonization. Establishing a parliament in Belfast – as opposed to maintaining what we might call ‘direct rule’ – allowed the government to achieve its overriding aim of removing the Irish question from British politics. Walter Long’s committee, which drew up the Government of Ireland Act in October 1919, reasoned that a two-parliament solution would also neutralise the criticism that part of Ireland remained under British control: ‘No nationalists would be retained under British rule. All Irishmen would be self-governing.’

Over the decades, the mechanisms of denial and evasion became habitual, the rationalisations more practiced, and ‘whataboutery’ became a competitive sport. My hope is that, in this centenary year, we can collectively interrogate some of these self-serving reflexes. My concern is that in remembering the apparent certainties of 1921, we might forget the messy compromises made in the 1990s, and the reasons why it became necessary to abandon inherited belief systems.

The challenge for historians, among others, is to ensure that the complex realities of the Irish situation a century ago are not ironed out for political, ideological or therapeutic reasons. Writing as the ‘decade of commemorations’ began, the late David Fitzpatrick encouraged historians to ‘raise awkward issues and, above all, seek to broaden the terms of debate’. As we contemplate the centenary of Northern Ireland, I think Fitzpatrick’s advice bears repeating. ‘Far from avoiding all forms of judgement’, he suggested, historians should try ‘to add moral intensity to the ways in which we commemorate and comprehend the past’.

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