

100 Years of the Ulster Covenant³⁰

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Introduction



Edward Carson signing the Ulster Covenant.

The years 2012 - 2022 will be a decade of commemorations, as the centenary anniversaries of some of the defining events of twentieth century Irish history are remembered, celebrated, re-analysed and revised: from the all out class warfare of the Dublin Lock-out of 1913; the First World War 1914-1918; the Easter Rising and the slaughter on the Somme in 1916; to the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1917; through to the partitioning of the island of Ireland and the establishment of two states, north and south, in the early 1920s.

This year, however, witnessed the first of the series of commemorations, as over 30,000 members of the Northern Protestant community celebrated the one hundred year anniversary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912. The commemoration was, however, surrounded by heightened tensions as extensive rioting in working class areas of Belfast took place in the weeks preceding the anniversary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant: the rioting was orchestrated by loyalist paramilitaries and given legitimacy by leading Unionist

politicians, as the divisions within Northern Irish society were once again exposed. The Ulster Covenant and the subsequent formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) marked the beginning of a decade of events which were to determine the future course of Irish history, events that shaped twentieth century Ireland, north and south, and as such will be the subject of this article.

A Loyal Ulster Rebellion

BEING CONVINCED in our consciences that Home Rule would be disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as of the whole of Ireland, subversive of our civil and religious freedom, destructive of our citizenship, and perilous to the unity of the Empire, we, whose names are underwritten, men of Ulster, loyal subjects of His Gracious Majesty King George V, humbly relying on the God whom our fathers in days of stress and trial confidently trusted, do hereby pledge ourselves in solemn Covenant, throughout this our time of threatened calamity, to stand by one another in defending, for ourselves and our children, our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ire-

³⁰Also known as the Solemn League and Covenant.

land. And in the event of such a Parliament being forced upon us, we further solemnly and mutually pledge ourselves to refuse to recognize its authority. In sure confidence that God will defend the right, we hereto subscribe our names¹.

The signing of the Ulster Covenant by over half a million Protestant men and women, who pledged to defend their “cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland” was Protestant Ulsters reaction to the British Liberal Partys introduction of a parliamentary bill that proposed a measure of independence be granted to Ireland Home Rule. The constitutional nationalists of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) had pursued Home Rule for Ireland for over two decades but their attempts, in alliance with the British Liberals at Westminster, had been thwarted on two previous occasions in 1886 and again in 1893 by an alliance of Ulster Unionist and British Conservative politicians, backed up by a mass movement of northern Protestants fearful of being ruled from Dublin by an Irish parliament. The leading Ulster Unionist at the time of the third attempt to introduce Home Rule for Ireland was Edward Carson, a Dublin-born lawyer, whose strategy was to exploit Ulster unionist opposition as a means of preventing Home Rule and maintaining Ireland within the union of the United Kingdom and Ireland. He believed that if Ulster could not be coerced into accepting Home Rule, the policy

would be abandoned. To ensure that this would happen, he sanctioned the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1912, an event which ‘unleashed violence into twentieth-century Irish politics².

The establishment of the UVF and the signing of the Ulster Covenant signalled the intent of the loyal Unionist population of the north east of Ireland to resist any severing of their link to the United Kingdom. The UVF expanded very rapidly and ‘by late 1913 was claiming a membership of 100,000: the true total may have fallen somewhat short of this boast but probably not by much³. By late April of the following year, 1914, the UVF was an armed militant force with the landing in Larne, County Antrim of ‘some 25,000 rifles and 3 million rounds of ammunition⁴. In November of that year the Irish Volunteers were formed, a response by nationalist Ireland to the unionist mobilisation. The threat of civil war loomed over Ireland until the outbreak of the First World War put hostilities on hold. The years that followed witnessed the slaughter of thousands of Irish Catholics and Protestants in the First World War. The leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916 had sought the complete separation of Ireland from Britain, not mere Home Rule (“Little more, indeed, than glorified local government⁵) and the outbreak of the War of Independence in 1917 saw nationalist Ireland striking out for full independence of the whole of island. After four years of guerrilla warfare with British forces, the leaders of this movement signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, a settlement which granted a level of independence for the twenty-six counties

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulster_Covenant

² J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 1.

³ Alvin Jackson, *Ireland: 1798-1998* (Oxford, 1999), p. 236.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.237.

⁵ F.S.L Lyons, ‘The Meaning of Independence’, in B. Farrell (ed.) *The Irish Parliamentary Tradition* (Dublin, 1973), p. 227.

of Southern Ireland, the six north eastern counties of Ulster being granted a separate Constitutional arrangement in 1920. The island of Ireland was to be partitioned. This was, in major part, the result of the mass mobilisation of parliamentary and paramilitary forces by Ulster Unionist politicians, business interests and the British Conservative Party. The anger and insecurity of the Protestant working class was exploited in the early years of that tumultuous decade and led to a movement of opposition to Home Rule that brought Ulster to the edge of insurrection.

The Ulster Plantation

What were the motivations that drove the Northern Protestant population to arm and to threaten insurrection so as to retain their link with the United Kingdom? The answer, as always, lies in the past. The 891,000 Protestants of Ulster in 1911 were largely descendant from seventeenth-century English and Scottish settlers who arrived in Ireland at the time of the Ulster Plantations:

Ulster was then the most remote and troublesome of the Irish provinces, and after the defeat of the last of the native Irish chieftains the British administration brought over English and Scottish planters and settled them on confiscated land in order to secure the area. The planters were Protestants, the native Irish whom they were replacing were Catholics. So Ulster became different from the rest of Ireland in that the

Anglo-Irish Protestant group was not a handful of landlords and squires but a substantial tenant-farming class⁶.

The Plantation of Ulster was an extraordinarily ambitious effort by the late Tudor and early Stuart monarchies to secure England's western flank and subdue the most lawless and rebellious part of Ireland. According to Moloney, it was during this period in Irish and British history that a doctrine emerged that is key to understanding the world of Ulster loyalism, namely "conditional loyalty": "the idea that citizens and the state are bound together by a contract in which the citizens agree to support and defend the state only as long as the state defends and supports them"⁷. The concept of conditional loyalty goes a long way in helping to understand, Moloney continues, why Protestants take up arms and threaten to defy the government they claim as their own; it encapsulates perfectly the Unionist paradox: Loyalists being disloyal⁸.

With momentum for Home Rule increasing in the early years of the twentieth century, the Protestant population of Ulster felt their position within the United Kingdom was coming under increasing threat. The British government was intending to betray them, sell them out and leave them isolated in an independent and overwhelmingly Catholic Ireland. This scenario revealed another aspect of what Moloney believes makes up the Ulster Protestant political persona alongside conditional loyalty: that is, insecurity⁹. The Ulster Protestants were feeling not only isolated but insecure too: their cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom was now, they felt, under

⁶Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (London, 1976), p.13.

⁷Ed Moloney, *Voices From The Grave: Two Mens War in Ireland* (London, 2010), p. 324.

⁸Ibid., pp 324-6.

⁹Ibid., p. 326.

threat. Their ‘infuriated reaction’ to the threat of Home Rule¹⁰ was all the more strongly felt as they had believed their position within the United Kingdom to be secure, as it had been given legislative effect some one hundred years before with the passing of the Act of Union in 1801 and had faced no serious challenge in the intervening years. The Act of Union which had provided the Northern Protestant population with such security had been introduced by the British government in response to the outbreak of rebellion in Ireland in the late eighteenth century the 1798 United Irishmen Rebellion.

1798: Protestants and Catholics Unite?

The United Irishmen was a coming together of some of the descendants of Ulster Plantation Protestants (namely, Presbyterians) and native Catholics in Belfast and Dublin in 1791, and initially ‘called for a complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in parliament, and the unity of all Irishmen in order to pursue this end’¹¹. Many of the leading figures of the United Irishmen were Northern Presbyterians ‘who resented the privileges of the Anglican Church the church of the landlords and aristocracy¹²’ and many were looking towards self-government as a political programme: ‘In part this sprang from the restrictions they themselves had suffered under the British governments sectarian policies, which were designed to suppress all signs of unorthodoxy; in part it was because the Presbyterian gentry and

mercantile classes had come to recognise that the trading and commercial relationship which the British had imposed on Ireland had restricted their economic advancement’¹³.

By the mid 1790s the United Irishmen, with Wolfe Tone a leading figure, had developed ever closer ties with the revolutionaries in France (with whom Britain had been at war with since 1793) and had developed as a revolutionary movement demanding an independent democratic Republic with full equality for the Catholic majority of the population¹⁴. Membership of the United Irishmen numbered some 280,000 in the early months of 1798, made up in the main of the Catholic peasantry of Leinster who were led by members of the Catholic and Presbyterian middle classes based in Dublin and Belfast. By the time rebellion in Ireland finally broke out in March 1798, the British administration had virtually snuffed out the threat by arresting several leading United Irishmen and by declaring martial law in the months before. Fighting did break out, however, when ‘thousands of badly armed peasants mobilized to take on the worlds strongest imperialist power’¹⁵ but the rebellion was crushed in less than a month: ‘The 98 was a devastating experience a short but bloody civil war, which involved the explosive release of pent up economic and sectarian pressures’¹⁶.

Sectarianism

The explosion of pent up sectarian pressures witnessed during the rising was in ev-

¹⁰Lee, *Ireland*, p. 1.

¹¹Jackson, *Ireland*, p. 12.

¹²Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, p.14.

¹³Geoffrey Bell, *The Protestants of Ulster* (London, 1976), p. 15.

¹⁴Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, p. 13.

¹⁵Mark Hewitt, *1798 The Year of Revolution: Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen* (Dublin, 1998), p. 25.

¹⁶Jackson, *Ireland*, p. 20.

idence in the north of Ireland in the years leading up to the outbreak of hostilities, for ‘the United Irishmen never had the support of the majority of Ulster Protestants. Antagonism between Catholic and Protestant was strong in many areas and was reinforced by competition for land tenancies.¹⁷’ Indeed, it is in this period that we see the emergence of an organisation that formed one of the pillars of the Protestant supremacy witnessed in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century: the Orange Order. Alongside the Unionist Party and loyalist paramilitaries, it was a vital cog in the Orange machine that ensured the Catholic population of the north remained second-class citizens for many of the decades of the century. Formed in 1795 ‘as a militant Protestant organization dedicated to preserving Protestant supremacy’ the Orange Order supplied many of the recruits that formed the yeomanry of the 1790s a part-time force officered by the landlords. ‘When the rebellion came in 1798 more Ulster Protestants served the king in the yeomanry than fought against him in the United Irishmen¹⁸.’ The British authorities were unnerved at the slightest ‘possibility that the always disaffected Catholics and a section, albeit a minority, of the Protestants might come together’ that they applied more vigorously than ever before the age-old policy of divide and rule¹⁹. Indeed, Ireland was saved for England, according to Bell, ‘by encouraging Protestant sectarianism, by mercilessly putting down the republicans before and during the rising and by assisting in the hostility between Catholic and Protestant peasantry’²⁰.

¹⁷Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, p. 14.

¹⁸Ibid., p.13.

¹⁹ Bell, *Protestants of Ulster*, p. 15.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

²¹Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, p. 14.

²² Hewitt, *Northern Ireland*, p.5.

Within two years of the 1798 Rebellions defeat, the British government had introduced the Act of Union which abolished Irish legislative independence and thus integrated Ireland into the United Kingdom. One consequence of this was that ‘restrictions on industry and trade were lifted and Ulster, particularly Belfast, prospered under the union²¹’. As the nineteenth century progressed, the textiles and engineering industries of the north east of Ireland expanded rapidly: ‘Scottish raw materials, British finance and markets tied the Northern employers to the Empire. Belfast itself grew from 28,000 people in 1813, to 100,300 in 1851 and tripled again from 120,000 in 1860, to 350,000 by 1900²²’. By the early twentieth century, the economy of the industrial north-east was outperforming the more backward, mainly agricultural economy of the rest of Ireland and there were a thousand strings that bound Ulster to the United Kingdom. So with the introduction of the Home Rule Bill in 1911, which threatened the vital economic interests and constitutional position of Ulsters Protestants, they mobilised:

At this point Dublin barrister Edward Carson and the Ulster Unionists entered the story, leading the opposition of Northern Ireland Protestants to Home Rule and bringing them to the edge of insurrection. Carson won the support of the British Conservative Party and set out on a whirlwind campaign throughout Ulster mobilising grass-roots Loyalists to the cause.

His efforts culminated in the signing of the Ulster Covenant at Belfast City Hall in September 1912 by over half a million men and women, some using their own blood for ink.²³

This cross-class collaboration of Northern Irish Protestants - a banding together of wealthy industrialists, upper and middle class Unionist politicians, the rural poor, the urban Protestant working class and the emergence of a loyalist paramilitary force was so powerful a movement that once discussions of Home Rule recommenced after their suspension during the First World War, the north east area of Ulster was excluded from any real prospect of being forced into a Home Rule settlement between the British government and nationalist Ireland.

‘A Carnival of Reaction’

The Government of Ireland Act, introduced at Westminster in February 1920, brought the Northern Irish state into existence: the Bill ‘proposed two Home Rule parliaments in Ireland, one for most of the country, the other for six of the nine Ulster counties’²⁴. The new northern parliament was opened in Belfast City Hall on 22 June 1921 and the occasion marked the end of Westminster’s direct authority over Ireland, an authority dating back to the passage of the Act of Union in 1801.

The partitioning of Ireland however would, as James Connolly predicted in 1914, lead to a ‘carnival of reaction’:

But Ireland, what of Ireland?
It is the trusted leaders of Ireland that in secret conclave with the enemies of Ireland

have agreed to see Ireland as a nation disrupted politically and her children divided under separate political governments with warring interests.

Now, what is the position of Labour towards it all? Let us remember that the Orange aristocracy now fighting for its supremacy in Ireland has at all times been based upon a denial of the common human rights of the Irish people; that the Orange Order was not founded to safeguard religious freedom, but robbed whilst so sundered and divided, the Orange aristocracy went down to the lowest depths and out of the lowest pits of hell brought up the abominations of sectarian feuds to stir the passions of the ignorant mob. No crime was too brutal or cowardly; no lie too base; no slander too ghastly, as long as they served to keep the democracy asunder.

And now that the progress of democracy elsewhere has somewhat muzzled the dogs of aristocratic power, now that in England as well as in Ireland the forces of labour are stirring and making for freedom and light, this same gang of well-fed plunderers of the people, secure in Union held upon their own dupes, seek by threats of force to arrest the march of idea and stifle the light of civilisation and liberty. And, lo and behold, the trusted

²³Moloney, *Voices From The Grave*, p. 329.

²⁴Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, p. 22.

guardians of the people, the vaunted saviours of the Irish race, agree in front of the enemy and in face of the world to sacrifice to the bigoted enemy the unity of the nation and along with it the lives, liberties and hopes of that portion of the nation which in the midst of the most hostile surroundings have fought to keep the faith in things national and progressive.

Such a schemetic betrayal of the national democracy of industrial Ulster would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured. To it Labour should give the bitterest opposition, against it Labour in Ulster should fight even to the death, if necessary, as our fathers fought before us²⁵.

Any prospect of the 'unity of the Irish labour movement' was destroyed, by the partitioning of the island. The working class men and women who were the backbone of the Irish Republican Army's struggle against the British forces during the War of Independence from 1917-1921, those who made the greatest sacrifices, were the ones who gained the least. The leaders of labour in the south, on the crest of the European-wide revolutionary enthusiasm after the October 1917 revolution, conceded too much to the nationalist movement in the fight for independence against the British; the same na-

tionalist movement, led by middle class leaders such as Arthur Griffith, Eamonn de Valera and Michael Collins, too readily gave up the idea of fighting for the North when settling peace terms with the British government during the treaty negotiations of 1920-1. The cross-class alliance of Ulster Protestants in the years leading up to the founding of the two parliaments was the major determining factor in their reluctance to attempt to secure independence for the whole of the island—the signing of the Ulster Covenant and the formation of a loyalist paramilitary force, the UVF, marked the beginning of the division of Ireland, which ultimately saw the establishment of two conservative, reactionary states in which the interests of the working class in both jurisdictions were bottom of the ruling elites' agendas.

Conclusion

The creation of two Home Rule governments in the early 1920s, one in Dublin, the other in Belfast, led to the division of the Irish working class as a whole on the island, and in particular, led to the abandonment of the Catholic working class of the north. A minority within a majority Protestant state, cut off from their co-religionists in the new Irish Free State, they were left to fend for themselves in a new state which, from birth, had its working class divided. The Catholics in the north were to face decades of sectarian discrimination:

the Unionists set about constructing an Orange and Protestant state with almost all political power and patronage in their own hands and operated an elaborate and comprehensive system of discrim-

²⁵ *Irish Worker*, 14 March. 1914.

ination in housing and jobs which kept the minority in a position of permanent and hopeless inferiority²⁶.

The Protestant working class, wedded to the new Northern Irish state, led by upper and middle class protestant politicians heavily influenced by the economic imperatives of the wealthy industrialists of Ulster and their business ties to the British Empire, believed they had more to materially gain by sacrificing their class interests and joined forces with their co-religionists

to create a 'Protestant parliament for a Protestant people' in the subsequent years. From its inception, the Northern Irish state was riven with sectarianism from the police to the judiciary, in housing, education and employment. When the Catholic population sought to end these sectarian practices with their demands for civil rights in the 1960s it provoked a furious backlash from the Protestant population, it's politicians and paramilitary forces, which led to the outbreak of 'the Troubles', a thirty year conflict the effects of which we are still dealing with today.

²⁶Farrell, *Northern Ireland*, p. 81.