

Dr Russell Rees

CCEA

A2

PARTITION OF IRELAND 1900-25



FER DAY. SIR EDWARD CARSON SIGNING THE COVENANT, BELFAST CITY HALL, 28th SEPT. 1912.



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Colourpoint Educational
An imprint of Colourpoint Creative Ltd
Colourpoint House
Jubilee Business Park
21 Jubilee Road
Newtownards
County Down
Northern Ireland
BT23 4YH

Tel: 028 9182 0505
E-mail: sales@colourpoint.co.uk
Web site: www.colourpoint.co.uk



Russell Rees completed a doctoral
thesis in Irish History at the
University of Ulster in 1986. He
spent the next 30 years teaching
History at Omagh Academy.
Among the books he has written
are *Ireland 1900–25* (2008), *Ireland
Under the Union 1800–1900* (2018),
both of which were published by
Colourpoint, and *Labour and the
Northern Ireland Problem 1945–51:
The Missed Opportunity* (2009).

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For my father, Bob Rees

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Russell Rees
October 2022



Ireland

Chapter 1

Ireland 1900–1910

Introduction

On 17 December 1885, William Ewart Gladstone, the great reforming Liberal leader, made an announcement to the press in which he declared that he was ready to accept Home Rule for Ireland. This bombshell forced the Irish question to the top of the political agenda at Westminster. Gladstone's conversion was viewed as a personal triumph for Charles Stewart Parnell, the Irish Nationalist leader, who had directed the campaign for Home Rule in Ireland and at Westminster. Under Parnell's leadership, the Nationalists had built a united, disciplined political force in the House of Commons, that was supported in Ireland by the massed ranks of the tenant farming class. Parnell had also taken time to cultivate support among Irish communities living in England and Scotland. Gladstone had been a close observer of this development. Following the 1885 general election, Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) held the balance of power with its 86 seats. This gave the IPP the power to make or break a government, another development that caught Gladstone's attention. Parnell had also grasped the importance of balancing the type of militant rhetoric and action required to mobilise support in Ireland with the more moderate and subtle approach necessary to influence public opinion in Britain. This was a tactic that was subsequently copied by the Unionist leader, Sir Edward Carson, in the period immediately before World War I.

The Liberal Party's support for Irish Home Rule was countered by the Conservative Party's determined defence of the Union. Thus, around the turn of the century, the Irish question emerged as one of the great issues dividing the two main parties at Westminster. The Liberals' endorsement of Home Rule coincided with the formation of the Irish Unionist Party. Its electoral strength rested primarily in Ulster, where it was closely linked in these early years to the Orange Order, the Church of Ireland and the former Irish Tory Party. These Unionists believed that Ireland's present and future prosperity depended on the maintenance of the Union.

Electoral reform in 1884–5 provided the backdrop for the emergence of more modern and representative Unionist and Nationalist parties. Parnell had risen to prominence as one of a handful of “obstructionist” Nationalist MPs who incurred the wrath of fellow MPs by holding up parliamentary business. The objective was to force the House of Commons to consider Irish Home Rule. This raised his profile in Ireland, but it was his involvement in agrarian agitation that elevated Parnell to the leadership of the IPP.

In late 1879, Parnell accepted an invitation to become president of the Land League, the radical agrarian body that fronted the campaign for peasant proprietorship. With generous financial support from the Irish diaspora, particularly in the United States, the organisation spread quickly across the country from its County Mayo base. While its network of branches failed to extend into North-East Ulster, the Land League proved very successful in forcing rent reductions and restricting evictions in many parts of the country. The institution of landlordism was effectively undermined by the movement’s actions, as successive Westminster governments responded to the agitation by paving the way for the tenant farmers to become owners of their holdings. Indeed, such was the intensity of this agrarian struggle that it was commonly known as the Land War, as the forces of the state found themselves battling with the Land League for control over much of rural Ireland. While the Land League withheld official backing for the violence that was increasingly deployed to enforce the movement’s wishes, the level of agrarian crime threatened to overwhelm the civil authority. The agitation was brought to a close by a combination of government concessions and Parnell’s decision to adopt a new strategy in 1882. Yet the 1879–82 campaign marked only the first phase of a prolonged period of agrarian strife that would recur intermittently until the early years of the twentieth century.

The Land League had mobilised the tenant farming class in the struggle against Irish landlordism, and Parnell recognised that this development could have a significant bearing on the campaign for Irish Home Rule. In effect, the land and the national questions overlapped. Under his leadership, the social and economic objectives of the Land League were harnessed to the political demand for Home Rule. In mid-1882, Parnell took the necessary steps to wind down the agrarian agitation to focus on the demand for Home Rule, a campaign that would be pursued by exclusively constitutional means. The Land League was replaced by the Irish National League, a body that was more political in character. While it expanded upon the work begun by the Land League, the Irish National League was a much more centralised organisation that was firmly under Parnell’s control. It quickly swallowed the Land League’s structures and soon had branches all over the country. The National League was at the forefront of the campaign for self-government, highlighting the mantra that only an Irish

parliament could resolve Irish problems. It was also active at local level, where the selection of parliamentary candidates became one of its primary functions. The efforts of the National League ensured that the demand for Home Rule dominated the political discourse in Ireland, while Parnell's stature as leader of the IPP, together with his carefully crafted ambiguous rhetoric, attracted a broad range of Nationalist support. Gladstone was confident that he could deal with Parnell, and he introduced his first Home Rule Bill in 1886. However, the Liberal prime minister failed to gain the unanimous approval of his own backbenchers, and the bill was rejected on its second reading in the House of Commons. A second attempt to pass a Home Rule Bill followed in 1893, and it secured a majority in the Commons before being overwhelmingly defeated in the House of Lords. The ageing Liberal leader subsequently resigned. Although Gladstone had failed to deliver Home Rule, an informal alliance had been established with Parnell and his successors, which meant that the issue was likely to be revisited by the Liberals at some point in the future.

Following the defeat of the first Home Rule Bill, Parnell largely withdrew from public life. The primary reason for this was that he had previously begun a relationship with Katherine O'Shea, the wife of an Irish Nationalist MP. Consequently, Parnell spent much of his time in England living with Mrs O'Shea. The liaison was hidden from the public, but this changed dramatically in December 1889, when Parnell was named as co-respondent in divorce proceedings initiated by Mrs O'Shea's husband, Captain William O'Shea. The negative publicity surrounding the divorce case destroyed Parnell's career, and he lost the leadership following a vote by his Irish MPs in December 1890. Parnell did not yield without a fight, and a minority of the party remained fiercely loyal to the deposed leader. Within a year, however, and less than four months after his marriage to Katherine, Parnell died at the age of 45 following an exhausting by-election campaign in Ireland. The subsequent Parnellite split sapped much of the IPP's energy during the 1890s, a period that was dominated by bitter divisions over party strategy. There were also predictable accusations of betrayal made against those who had ousted Parnell. In spite of the stigma around divorce in the late Victorian era, Parnell's reputation did not suffer after his death. While his achievements were highlighted, his failures were largely ignored. In truth, Parnell's refusal to endorse the Plan of Campaign that ran from 1886–90 distanced him from senior figures in the IPP. The Plan was yet another phase of the agrarian struggle that had been prompted by a sharp fall in agricultural prices. Individual landlords were targeted in the south and west of the country, but the Plan failed to repeat the success of the Land League as Parnell remained aloof from the agitation. By this stage Home Rule was Parnell's clear priority, and he believed that violence in rural Ireland only damaged his cause in Britain.

Parnell's distant and autocratic style of leadership had created tension in the IPP's senior ranks. When he died, a power struggle ensued in which John Dillon, William O'Brien, Tim Healy and John Redmond played prominent roles. Personality clashes and serious disagreements over policy sustained the rancour and internal strife until the party was reunited in 1900. By then the United Irish League, the latest radical agrarian movement, had created the right circumstances for reunification, but the IPP struggled to recapture the dynamism of the early Parnellite years. Moreover, the experience of the bitter infighting during the 1890s would cast a shadow over the reunited party in the early part of the twentieth century. The internal wrangling had also weakened the party's influence on Dublin Corporation. The 1880s had witnessed a Parnellite takeover of the Corporation, but it was not immune from the acrimony of the 1890s. Later, the extension of the local government franchise in 1898 created a platform for opponents of constitutional Nationalism on the Corporation. At the national level, meanwhile, the IPP retained its association with the land issue, as the struggle for peasant proprietorship reached its climax.

At the opposite end of the political spectrum, Irish Unionism, which had emerged as a response to the Home Rule threat, would place the defence of landlord rights at the heart of its programme. These Irish Unionists emphasised their religious and cultural connections with the people of Great Britain. They were also eager to highlight their place in the British Empire, which they identified as a progressive group of nations that promoted liberty and progress. Unionism, however, was even more prone to division than Nationalism. Regional, denominational and class tensions were never far from the surface. Yet, when Home Rule threatened, these differences were set aside as Unionists quickly and effectively closed ranks to defend the constitutional status quo.

Ireland 1900–1910

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Ireland experienced major social change, as the process by which land was transferred from the landlords to the tenants was rapidly accelerated. This largely resolved the land question that had dominated Irish politics in the second half of the nineteenth century. The land struggle had provided the battleground for Nationalism, which emerged as a powerful force in the guise of the Irish Party, or Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), towards the close of the century. Charles Stewart Parnell, its enigmatic leader, had used the land question to mobilise support for his Home Rule campaign. This, in turn, provoked a response from opponents of Irish Nationalism who viewed Home Rule as a threat to the long-term stability of the Union between Ireland and Great Britain. More specifically, Unionist leaders also claimed that their