

A 'Carnival of Reaction': Partition and the Defeat of Ireland's Revolutionary Wave

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For more than a generation, establishment historians and their acolytes in the southern media have dominated public debate about the nature and form of the Irish revolution. In their rendering, the Rising constituted an unnecessary skirmish between a benign, reforming empire and ultra-Catholic madmen and militarists. For many ordinary southerners, understandably cynical about the influence welded by the Catholic Church and a corrupt political establishment since partition, the seeds of conservatism seem apparent from the outset, flowing inevitably from the Rising and the revolutionary upheaval that followed. Since the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969, especially, a persistent and well-resourced effort has been made to show that partition reflected immutable differences between antagonistic 'ethno-national' or 'ethno-religious' blocs. Despite their rhetorical nationalism, the Dublin elite, fearful that northern political instability might spread southwards, went to great lengths to block popular sympathy for the northern struggle.

In the face of this concerted campaign of distortion, socialists assert a different understanding of what was at stake in the division of the country. Partition reflected not a pragmatic approach to containing sectarianism, but the defeat of Ireland's revolutionary wave and the consolidation of conservative regimes north and south in the interests of Irish capitalism and British imperialism. None of the main actors tried to assert, before partition, that the 'six counties' made up some natural ethnic or religious polity. Instead the northern state has been marked by instability from its founding. On four occasions between 1914 and 1920, the supposedly impregnable Ulster unionist monolith nearly came apart in internal wrangling over the boundaries of the new state, while the April 1918 conscription crisis shone a light on the deep ambiguity marking some Protes-

tant's devotion to King and Empire. Above all, the panicked and violent response of northern capitalists to the emergence of tentative class-based unity in Belfast in 1907, 1919 and 1932 underscores the extraordinary measures which the maintenance of partition has required.¹ On successive occasions, an industrial and political elite tied to the Orange Order unleashed state violence and fomented sectarian rioting and expulsions from homes and workplaces.

Partition represented the fall-back policy of an imperial state thrown onto the defensive during the revolutionary period. Even prior to the 1801 union, the political and military establishment consciously exploited sectarian tensions in Ireland, leaning on the Orange Order to defeat the 1798 Rebellion. Sectarian antipathy originated in colonisation but found new expression in disputes between desperate Catholic and Protestant tenants in rural mid-Ulster, taking root in industrialising Belfast as a consequence of rapid urban migration in the nineteenth century. At first the reactionary element in the British political elite backed Ulster unionist resistance to scupper home rule for all-Ireland, as when Randolph Churchill played the 'Orange card' in 1886 against Gladstone's first bill. Partition only emerged as a serious option for securing wider imperial interests and negating Irish independence once some measure of limited self-rule appeared inevitable. Throughout the revolutionary period the Tory establishment offered unwavering financial and military support to Ulster loyalism, even when this entailed a wide-scale and indiscriminate sectarian campaign against Belfast's Catholic minority.

Northern radicalism: anti-imperial and non-sectarian

The most sophisticated opposition to partition emerged not from constitutional nation-

¹Michael Farrell, *The Orange State* (Pluto, 1980)

alists, or even republicans, but from James Connolly, whose organising efforts in Belfast attuned him to its potential dangers. Connolly argued presciently that partition would fundamentally undermine labour's position - north and south - warning that along with perpetuating Orange bigotry and intolerance in the North, it would consolidate a church-dominated state run by bourgeois nationalists in the South. Writing in March 1914, after the constitutional nationalist leader, John Redmond, had consented to the temporary partition of four Ulster counties, Connolly warned that partition would 'create a carnival of reaction North and South' and 'set back the wheels of progress[,] destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured.' 'Against it,' he argued, 'Labour in Ulster should fight, even to the death, if necessary.'²

Connolly's non-sectarian and progressive reading resonated with a core of Ulster radicals in the years preceding 1916. Although numerically weak, northern republicanism played a key ideological role in the Rising, as its leadership emerged from a group of young republicans centred on veteran Dungannon Fenian Tom Clarke and including figures such as Seán Mac Diarmada, Bulmer Hobson, Denis McCullough and Patrick McCartan, all of whom had cut their teeth in the Dungannon Clubs, a venture in open separatist politics based on Griffith's policy of passive resistance. This non-insurrectionary challenge to constitutional nationalism dissolved in the face of parliamentary arithmetic, when the two general elections in 1910 handed the balance of power to John Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party. The apparent inevitability of home rule precipitated an IRB take-over by this grouping, backed financially by Joseph McGarrity, the treasurer of the Clan na Gael who, like McCartan hailed from Carrickmore in Tyrone. Ironically, Ulster unionist resistance prompted republicans to organise the Irish Volunteers as a means of reinvigorating re-

publicanism and countering the softening of nationalist antipathy to imperialism - a retreat attributed by Clarke to 'Redmond and his people and their ranting about being loyal to the British Empire'.³ When the First World War confirmed Redmond's public support for empire both Clarke and Connolly, from different perspectives, determined to organise for insurrection before the end of continental hostilities.

In the early twentieth century, the remnants of Ulster Fenianism espoused a markedly anti-imperial and non-sectarian outlook. By December 1910, McCartan wrote in *Irish Freedom*, the IRB newspaper that

the English Empire lives on the taxes wrung from the starving millions of India, and Ireland is asked to become a loyal portion of the Empire. We might perhaps share in the spoils - we too might fatten on the Indian - the Egyptians and other subject races. Ireland, we are told, now will be loyal if she gets some concession, Home Rule or devolution, and will become part of the Empire of exploitation. There is little danger that Ireland will purchase a partial freedom at such a price. We would rather remain a nation of political serfs than become a nation of imperial parasites. Better far for Ireland never to be free than to win freedom by joining in with the pirate Empire, sharing in the guilt and the spoils of wholesale massacre and theft. There are other ways of obtaining freedom, and one of them is by joining hands with our Indian brothers, so that both they and we may be stronger to fight against British tyranny.⁴

Furthermore, an impressive proportion of its rank-and-file leadership - in the IRB and

²*Irish Worker*, 14 March 1914.

³Tom Clarke to Joe McGarrity, 8 Dec. 1913 1909 in Gerard Mac Atasney, *Tom Clarke: Life, Liberty, Revolution* (Kildare, 2013), 270.

⁴*Irish Freedom*, Dec. 1910.

the Dungannon Clubs-came out of the radical Protestant tradition, including labour converts from the Orange Order who had joined Larkin in the 1907 Belfast Dockers' strike, or had been involved in nascent trade unions in rural Ulster. Establishment historians have made much of the republican commitment to an 'Irish-Ireland', but in the North, at least, this attracted rather than alienated radical Protestants, and posed no problems for Connolly either. As early as 1906, McCartan claimed that they 'should be tolerant towards their countrymen no matter to what creed or class they belong. The Ireland we want is not a Catholic Ireland nor a Protestant Ireland,' he insisted, 'but an Irish-Ireland.' This represented bourgeois nationalism, to be sure, but it was in no sense sectarian. In 1910 McCartan railed against 'the power of the priest...the greatest obstacle to nationalism in the country' and insisted that the IRB's new journal, *Irish Freedom*, should 'go straight for' this 'reactionary power', which had 'escaped too long'.

Pockets of liberal Protestant opinion survived across pre-partition Ulster. Captain Jack White of the Irish Citizen Army organised a meeting of more than four hundred at Ballymoney on 24 October 1913, where Roger Casement addressed the 'scattered Protestants' who desired 'friendship with our Catholic fellow countrymen, based on an equal recognition of their common Irish identity, against which the forces of intolerance and enmity were openly arrayed.'⁵ In 1920, predominantly Protestant Moneymore elected the local Sinn Féin arbitration court judge to the county council. In the period before partition was consolidated, a degree of fluidity existed in northern politics, suggesting openings for a challenge to sectarianism that we should not dismiss.

Although the leaders of Ulster republicanism were unreceptive, the socialist internationalism of first generation Ulster emi-

grants, Connolly and Larkin, received a sympathetic hearing among its working-class membership. Some of their Belfast members had been radicalised by the 1907 Dockers' Strike in that city, and in 1913 the RIC reported that the IRB in North Armagh and East Tyrone had sent 'trifling sums' to help Jim Larkin during the Lockout.⁶ In one instance, after receiving anti-recruiting literature linked to the execution of an Indian nationalist, the Ardboe IRB cell diverted some of their precious gun money to journalists for 'fomenting agitation' and 'harassing the British government' on the sub-continent.⁷

The Dungannon-Coalisland nexus represented the core territory of Mid-Ulster Fenianism, which fanned out in a crescent along the south and west shores of Lough Neagh, finding favour among local artisans, labourers, small farmers and factory workers. The Tyrone IRB were involved in nascent trade unionism-activism that continued into the revolutionary period.⁸ Indeed, intelligence reports from the RIC reflected the typical class prejudice of Edwardian Ireland, continually dismissing Tyrone republicans due to their low social status.⁹ Dungannon IRB members such as John 'Jack' McElvogue challenged these assumptions, standing successfully in the urban council's nationalist west ward 'to explode the old theory that it was only men with money, whether they had brains or not, were fit to look after the affairs of the town'.¹⁰ Yet the limitations of this position are clear: although working-class republicans occupied positions of leadership locally, the reality was that 'every important position in the party [was] occupied by men not of the Working Class'.¹¹

Protestant republicans like IRB member Herbert Moore Pim (who later reverted to unionism and even to open support for fascism) were both sober about the prospects for unity across the sectarian divide and principled in rejecting the pressures for an all-class unionist alliance. Lament-

⁵ Angus Mitchel, *16 Lives: Roger Casement* (Dublin, 2013)

⁶ CI Armagh, Oct. 1913 (TNA, CO 904/91).

⁷ Précis, 15 Aug. 1909 (TNA, CO 904/119).

⁸ McCluskey, *Fenians & Ribbonmen*, 11-12.

⁹ See CI Tyrone, Jan. 1915 (TNA, CO 904/96).

¹⁰ *DN*, 5 Jan. 1899.

¹¹ James Connolly, 'Sinn Féin and Socialism', *The Harp*, April 1908.

ing that Protestants ‘have been taught that the Catholic is an inferior sort of animal’ and that ‘the Orangeman thinks that by excluding Catholics from employment of every kind, there will be more work for him’, he advanced a class understanding of the politics of divide-and-rule. The ‘ascendancy has never benefited the Orange democracy’, Pim insisted, and ‘the only people who gain anything from this diabolical system of social poisoning are landlords, the linen sweaters, the place hunters, and the emigration agents.’¹² Indeed, grassroots northern republicans shared Connolly’s analysis of loyalism: the weakness of the ‘Orange working class’ in confronting their own employers, he’d written, were down to their having ‘been reared up among a people whose conditions of servitude were more slavish than their own’. Before 1916, at least, republicans were not prepared to acquiesce to the sectarian divisions in northern politics—or to accept them as permanent—and saw no contradiction between aspiring to independence and opposing loyalism. In this sense, they partially reflected Connolly’s position that ‘no good, but infinite evil, can come of truckling to [the Orange influence].’¹³

Nevertheless, the petit-bourgeois republican leadership failed to apply a class-based analysis to their own brand of nationalism. Seán Mac Diarmada, who with Tom Clarke formed the conspiratorial nucleus of the rebellion, criticised Larkin during the Lockout for talking ‘nationalism, but only in so far as he thinks it is likely to help along his socialist programme’ and lamented the ‘very bad un-national influence’ of support from English trade unions and the damage done to Irish manufacturing.¹⁴ As Connolly sardonically remarked in a contemporary article: ‘thus Labour is ever encouraged to revolt against the Orange sweaters of the North, but nothing must be done to encourage any such revolt against the Nationalist sweaters

of the South,’ which ‘has enabled the Orange leaders to openly flout and antagonise the Labour movement.’¹⁵ Connolly had earlier dismissed ‘the strutters and poseurs’ among Sinn Féin whose blindness to class inequality guaranteed ‘the certainty of friction between the Irish Socialist and the adherents of Sinn Féin.’¹⁶ The failure to promote an explicitly class-based politics—despite the genuine public and private sympathy of someone like Tom Clarke for the Lockout—exposed the fundamental weakness in northern radicalism prior to the Rising.¹⁷ It was only the extraordinary context of world war, in fact, that pushed these differences to the background and provided a basis for practical cooperation between republicanism and socialism.

The imperial basis for partition

A prevalent view exists that Britain represented a neutral arbiter in Irish affairs and that partition relied on the existence of ‘two nations’ in Ireland. The idea of British state impartiality relies on a very superficial acceptance of the contemporary position, as is Ruth Dudley Edwards’s daft assertion that, as empires went, ‘the British version was the most responsible and humane of all.’¹⁸ In theory you might raise this position with a Palawa or aboriginal inhabitant of Tasmania, but they were all exterminated.¹⁹

There is irrefutable evidence for the imperial motivation of partition in Ireland, or indeed in Palestine and India afterwards, where the British maintained their rule through the exacerbation of existing or emerging ethno-religious tensions, which then formed the basis of a geographical division on the terms of their favoured community. As Sir Henry Wilson remarked, the ‘Palestine problem’ was ‘exactly the same as the Irish—two different sets of people living in a small area, each hating the other ‘for

¹² McCluskey, *Fenians & Ribbonmen*, p. 109.

¹³ James Connolly, ‘North-East Ulster’, in *Forward*, 2 August 1913.

¹⁴ Seán Mac Diarmada to Joseph McGarrity, 12 Dec. 1913 (NLI, MS 17,618)

¹⁵ *Forward*, 7 June 1913

¹⁶ James Connolly, ‘Sinn Féin and Socialism’, *The Harp*, April 1908.

¹⁷ *Irish Freedom*, Oct. 1913.

¹⁸ Ruth Dudley Edwards, ‘Why does Ken Loach loathe his country so much?’ in *Daily Mail*, 30 May 2006.

¹⁹ Colin Tatz, *With Intent To Destroy: Reflections on Genocide* (Verso, 2003), 78-9.

the love of God'.²⁰ Sir Ronald Storrs, the first British military governor of Jerusalem, argued revealingly that a new Israeli state 'would form for England 'a little loyal Jewish Ulster' in a sea of hostile Arabism.'²¹ Colonial administrators, statesmen and soldiers all acknowledged the imperial basis of partition; this was an approach shared by Ulster unionists themselves.

Lloyd George's coalition (December 1916-October 1922) claimed it had no self-interest in Ireland, but his government was dominated by the Tories, the very same men who challenged parliament's sovereignty, openly supported the Curragh 'Mutiny' and funded the Larne gunrunning in 1914.²² Indeed, John St. Loe Strachey, the editor of the reactionary *Spectator* magazine (how little has changed) and creator of the 'two nation's theory' consoled Carson before the passing of the Government of Ireland Act 1920, which introduced six-county partition: 'As you know, I distrust L.G. probably more than you do, but at the same time I am terribly afraid of anything like splitting the forces opposed to revolution whether in Ireland or here.'²³ While in office, the Tories steadfastly reinforced partition, both in legislation and through massive financial support for the security apparatus of the new Northern Ireland administration.

The rationale was clear: the British political élite supported Ulster unionists in order to subvert home rule and, failing that, would partition the country, handicapping any independent Irish state to the extent that it remained a virtual British possession. During the Buckingham Palace Conference of 1914, Lord Milner, the British 'race patriot' and arch-imperialist, advised Carson to 'stick out for the six counties as a minimum', although he added, 'There is no particular virtue in counties... as long as the excluded area is one solid block.'²⁴ Tory op-

position to home rule was certainly expedient, but it operated within a definite framework. Milner himself, along with Tory leader Bonar Law, had attempted to cut a deal with 'the patriot section of the labour party' in order to stymie the Independent Labour Party.²⁵ Carson employed a similar tactic in forming the Ulster Unionist Labour Association in December 1918.

During the home rule crisis, Milner formed the Ulster Union Defence League to rescue 'the white settler colony of Ulster from submersion in a sea of inferior Celts'.²⁶ His chief ally in this venture was Walter Long, the former leader of Irish unionist MPs at Westminster before Carson's appointment. Long was a frontrunner for the Tory leadership in 1911, but stood down in favour of Bonar Law's selection as unity candidate. Carson himself was poised to run, but opted rather to lead Ulster's resistance to home rule. Long's parliamentary committee drew up the plans for six-county partition, which led to the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, after Ulster unionists informed him they couldn't control nine. Again, this policy revolved on an imperial pivot, which operated globally. Long's committee had been preceded by one led by Lord Curzon, who had previously partitioned Bengal in 1905, and who in May 1917 drafted a scheme for the British cabinet that counties could vote themselves out of a southern parliament on a fifty-five per cent majority 'for the transparent purpose of enabling a minority in Tyrone and Fermanagh to decide the issue'.²⁷

Ulster's stand for empire

Ulster unionists themselves viewed the six-county area as 'an impregnable, Protestant and Unionist Pale', which would serve as 'a bridge head for the re-conquest of Ireland' in

²⁰Quoted in introduction to Keith Jefferies (eds.), *An Irish Empire? Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (Manchester, 1996), 15.

²¹Ronald Storrs, *The memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs* (London, 2008), 364.

²²Alvin Jackson, *Home rule: an Irish history, 1800-2000* (London, 2004), 153-4.

²³Strachey to Carson, 13 October 1920 (Carson papers, PRONI, D1507/1)

²⁴Milner to Carson, 21 July 1914 (PRONI, Irish papers, D1507/A/6/40).

²⁵J. O. Stubbs, 'Lord Milner and Patriotic Labour, 1914-18', *English Historical review* 87, 4, 1972, 717-54.

²⁶Paul Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its origins, 1886-1925* (Dublin, 2011), 31.

²⁷Draft for the bill for the Government of Ireland, May 1917 (TNA, CAB 24/89).

event of the declaration of a Republic.²⁸ On the inauguration of the northern parliament in June 1921, Hamar Greenwood congratulated Craig for ‘making strong the cement of Empire.’²⁹ After the Free State bombarded the Four Courts with British artillery the following June, Winston Churchill felt confident in assuaging Craig’s fears regarding his administration’s security now that ‘Collins had definitely drawn the sword against the enemies of the British Empire.’³⁰ In reality, the distinction between Ulster unionist and British conservative leaders is a false one, and the massive security apparatus and funding which enabled Craig to consolidate his fledgling regime totally depended on British largesse.

Partition was not inevitable; it relied on human agency and the actions of a British state intent on securing its interests. In recent years Irish historiography seems determined to legitimise partition as the logical consequence of the fact that two distinct ‘nations’ inhabit the island. But this ‘two nations’ approach does not in any way reflect the historical record. Hugh de Fellenberg Montgomery, the Ulster unionist representative at the abortive Irish Convention of 1917–18 wrote that unionists ought not put much store on the theory, but rather ‘take firmer ground as loyal subjects and Denizens of the British empire’.³¹ Likewise, Joseph Fisher, the unionist representative on the Boundary Commission³² stated that Ulster unionists only employed the two nations theory as a ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ (reduction to absurdity). ‘[R]ecently it has come into the field of practical politics’, he observed, but ‘[w]e have never asked for it or accepted it for its own sake.’³³

The partition of Ireland did not rely on the existence of two nations, or indeed, on

fears of religious persecution, but on the determination of a Tory political élite, which included the Ulster unionist leaders, to preserve imperial interests. Six counties rather than nine represented the largest area unionists felt that they could control, in line with the UVF contingency plan of 1914. ‘Self-determination’ for an ‘Ulster nation’ was meaningless: the enterprise was explicitly designed to subvert self-determination.

In August 1914, James Connolly characterised Ulster loyalism as an inherently reactionary and colonial ideology.

The Carsonites say that their fathers were planted in this country to assist in keeping the natives down in subjection that this country might be held for England[.] Therefore, say the Carsonites, we have kept our side of the bargain[,] and rather than admit that these Catholics...are our equals, we will fight, in the hope that our fighting will cause the English people to revolt against their government and re-establish us in our historic Position as an English colony in Ireland, superior to, and unhampered by, the political institutions of the Irish natives.³⁴

Connolly’s evidence came from the language of Orange politicians themselves. For example Andrew Horner, the unionist MP for South Tyrone, claimed that ‘Ulster’ represented the ‘people of British race’, the 200,000 men ‘enrolled in the Unionist clubs’ and the ‘half a million men and women’ who signed the covenant: a people with ‘the great traditions of a race that had never known defeat, and the sympathy and help of all

²⁸Montgomery to Stronge, 6 Apr. 1920 (PRONI, D627/435/21); Montgomery to Leo Maxse, 7 May 1920 (PRONI, D627/435/75).

²⁹Greenwood to Craig, 10 June 1921 (PRONI, Craigavon papers, T3775/14/2).

³⁰Churchill to Craig, 7 July 1922 (PRONI, CAB 6/75).

³¹Montgomery to W. M. Jellett, 19 February 1918 (PRONI, D627/432/11).

³²The Boundary Commission was established under Article XII of the Treaty and collapsed acrimoniously when Fisher leaked the details to a Tory newspaper in 1925.

³³Fisher to Montgomery, 4 March 1918 (PRONI, D627/433/68).

³⁴*Irish Worker*, 8 August 1914.

³⁵House of Commons Debate, 15 January 1913, Hansard, vol. 46, cc2175–8; *Tyrone Courier*, 30 January 1913.

that was best from every quarter of the Empire'.³⁵ In February 1913, he claimed that 'the only ascendancy he knew in Ireland was the ascendancy of industry over sloth, of intelligence over ignorance, and of thriftiness over thriftlessness [sic], and no act of Parliament could change those characteristics of the race that inhabited this island'.³⁶ These assumptions echoed elite sentiment: both British political parties contained enthusiastic supporters of eugenics and social Darwinism, and it was not difficult to apply these to enforcing inequality in Ireland. Viewed from the perspective of the British elite and Ulster unionists themselves, partition relied on a racist conception of identity in Ireland, with religion viewed as a racial indicator. Northern Ireland emerged from an imperialist and racist/sectarian definition of the Irish nation, with the current political institutions at Stormont built on the logic of early twentieth-century British imperialism.

The failure to challenge partition

Recent controversy about Peter Hart's analysis of IRA operations in Cork has meant that for nearly twenty years the only serious discussion of sectarian violence during the revolutionary period has focused on the southwest. By contrast the irrefutable and exponentially greater resort to sectarianism in the northeast is almost completely ignored. Violence in Ulster between 1920 and 1922 emerged primarily from the campaign of the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC), a state force recruited directly out of the paramilitary UVF, which pursued a strategy of reprisal killings mirroring British military policy throughout Ireland during the Anglo-Irish war.³⁷ Indeed, there is primary evidence from senior USC commanders who criticised the force's sectarianism and its deliberate killing of civilians and al-

leged that the government in Belfast sanctioned and excused such conduct.³⁸ Furthermore, the British government provided £6 million (approximately £280 million in today's money) for the campaign in Ulster even though Lloyd George was fully aware of the nature of the USC, describing it as an Irish version of Mussolini's *Fascisti*.³⁹ Despite full knowledge of the facts, the British government funded sectarianism in Ireland because it suited its objectives.

Our understanding of the Irish revolution should encompass a wider appreciation of British strategic interests and imperial ideology. These factors ensured that Ulster unionists enjoyed the decisive support of the British Conservative elite-in parliament, the army and the Palace-at critical moments throughout the revolutionary decade. Nevertheless, the nature of the Sinn Féin movement which emerged after the Easter Rising also contributed to the defeat of the Irish revolution. My own research on Tyrone suggests that while scope existed for a class-based challenge to the two bourgeois-led confessional blocks, the social conservatism of the revolutionary elite and, ultimately, the terms of the Treaty settlement strangled attempts to promote class-based politics, particularly among members of the republican movement.

Sinn Féin represented a nationalist, bourgeois revolution-not dissimilar to numerous independence struggles that took place across the globe over the course of twentieth century. Its ideology, as understood in its founding document, the 1916 Proclamation, was both non-sectarian and republican. Sinn Féin spoke of social equality and laid the blame for sectarian schism at the door of British imperialism. Nevertheless, many who sheltered under the post-Rising Sinn Féin umbrella were socially conservative and lukewarm on the republic, including Arthur Griffith himself. Significantly, the first attempt to implement the Sinn Féin policy ended in acrimony before

³⁶ *Tyrone Courier*, 20 March 1913.

³⁷ Fergal McCluskey, 'The "Tan War" in Tyrone, a comparative analysis of IRA and crown force violence, 1920-21' *Irish Sword* 27 (Autumn, 2010), 109 .

³⁸ Report of Gen. Ricardo, June 1922 (TNA, CO 906/27).

³⁹ Michael Farrell, *Arming the Protestants: the formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary, 1920-27* (London, 1983), 153; 283.

the 1910 elections, when the young northern cohort in the IRB criticized Griffith's monarchism and his attempted rapprochement with the Healyite All-for-Ireland League, the party of Catholic conservatism and political pet of William Martin Murphy.⁴⁰

Griffith's opposition to Larkin and the Dublin working class throughout the Lock-out and his open anti-semitism did not prevent his appointment as vice president to the second Sinn Féin in 1917. The Anglo-Irish Treaty constituted the foundation document of the Irish counterrevolution, for it consummated the alliance between the Healyites and the Sinn Féin conservatives led by Griffith. The Healyites eventually dominated the new Free State, after the purge of 'revolutionaries, Irish-Irelanders and most especially the militarist-republicans' from the government.⁴¹ This élite singularly failed to challenge partition and, while consolidating the Free State (or the birth of Irish democracy, as revisionists would have it) carried out a proxy war on behalf of the British state against militant republicans and working-class radicals.

In Ulster itself, Sinn Féin was built to defeat constitutional nationalism and not to convert Ulster unionists. Its northern policy involved co-opting middle-class former constitutionalists-often with little interest in a genuinely popular movement-to bolster electoral prospects in Ulster. The petit-bourgeois nationalist revolution never gave serious consideration to fulfilling the socialist aspects of the Proclamation or to attracting working-class support. In June 1919 Sinn Féin commissioned a report from Ulster Protestant, W. Forbes Patterson, to investigate new avenues for republicanism in Ulster. Patterson suggested that Sinn Féin emphasize the Dáil's 'progressive' and 'radical' Democratic Programme in order 'to weld labour interests and Irish nationalism together',⁴² but his suggestions were virtually ignored.

Sinn Féin's conservatism not only failed to appeal to working-class Protestants, but facilitated, in part, Sinn Féin President Ea-

mon de Valera's trouncing at the hands of Joe Devlin in the Belfast Falls constituency in 1918. Devlin's position rested on the rhetoric and symbolism of democracy and even labour, but the reality of conservative, Catholic nationalism and acquiescence in empire. It was not until the midst of the 1920 pogroms that the nationalist community in Belfast shifted its allegiance to Sinn Féin. When we speak of the Sinn Féin elite that eventually came to terms with empire and partition through the Treaty, we are describing an established class within Irish society that had few qualms about empire and which accepted the racist and colonial definition of nationalism underpinning British policy.

There is no doubt that the unionist leadership in the North feared the labour movement much more than they worried about Sinn Féin. Carson's incendiary speech at Finaghy on 12 July 1920, which contributed to the shipyard expulsions, had as much to do with labour's emergence (winning twelve seats in that January's Belfast municipal elections) as it had to do with the advance of Sinn Féin in Ulster. Indeed, a socialist viewpoint - articulated mainly through the ITGWU or the Belfast-based Workers' Union, whose leading lights had not yet accepted partition-had gained the support of Catholic and Protestant workers. Superficially, unionist hegemony appeared impregnable, but mass rallies and Orange pageantry masked rancorous disagreements over labour and conscription in both the rural west and urban east.

Labour, the National Question and the Role of Sectarianism

Two labour struggles-Belfast's famous 1919 General Strike and a series of less well known industrial struggles in Tyrone the previous year-sharply convey the dynamics of class politics and sectarianism in Belfast and rural mid-Ulster. Tyrone saw considerable trade union activity in late 1917 and 1918. Both Protestant and Catholic workers joined

⁴⁰McCartan to McGarrity, 7 Apr. 1909 (NLI, McGarrity papers, P8186); Garvin, *Evolution*, 105-10.

⁴¹Regan, *Counter-revolution*, 259.

⁴²Mitchell, *Revolutionary government*, 166.

the Worker's Union, organised locally by Neal O'Donnell of Coalisland, and provincially by Dawson Gordon (later Labour Party representative in Belfast's Dock ward) and Robert 'Bob' McClung, both adherents of Connollyite socialist republicanism at this juncture, as was Sam Kyle, the WU's leader in Belfast.⁴³ In March 1918, 140 Catholic and Protestant workers struck Brown's Soapworks in Donaghmore, attacking 'blacklegs' and 'parad[ing] the village with a red flag,' while Charles McKeown and Robert Stewart drove a hijacked company lorry through the front gates. The press reported that Protestant workers taunted them with Union Jacks 'supplied by the factory owner' before the strike was resolved through arbitration in favour of the workers.⁴⁴ This worrying episode in cross-community solidarity anticipated the creation of Carson's Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA) in December 1918.⁴⁵

In the midst of an upturn in labour militancy, Ireland was rocked by the conscription crisis, and despite the way the 'Great War' is remembered today in unionist circles, it is clear that some Protestants shared their nationalist neighbours' antipathy to conscription, and that their objections deepened as the war dragged on. IRA volunteer Nicholas Smyth claimed that in Drogheda 'a number of young Ulster Volunteers came along to us and offered to join the Irish Volunteers in their determination to fight conscription.'⁴⁶ A similar approach was made in Clanabogan, a majority Protestant townland near Omagh and, interestingly, the scene of an ITGWU-organised 'strike of farm labourers' in August 1918.⁴⁷ In Omagh itself, a short-lived news sheet, *The Con-*

scription News, suggested that conscription exercised 'the minds of all-Protestant and Unionist no less than Catholic and Nationalist' as the readership was 'surprisingly numerous and still more surprisingly heterogeneous.'⁴⁸ The decisions by the bourgeois Sinn Fein leadership to sign the conscription pledge outside Catholic chapels and to support Cardinal Logue's pact with Joe Devlin during the 1918 general election demonstrated that the rhetoric of non-sectarian republicanism sat uneasily with electoral reality. Leading Armagh republican John McCoy denounced this 'stupid blunder', which saved the IPP from electoral oblivion outside Belfast, and insisted that this 'sectarian policy' had knocked 'the bottom out of all the castles in the air' that advanced 'Protestant/Presbyterian republicans were building up'.⁴⁹

By this stage, unionist employers in particular had determined to play on sectarian divisions in order to undermine the spread of local trade unionism. These tactics reached their peak in Tyrone in 1919, when 220 workers struck at Fulton's woollen mill at Caledon.⁵⁰ There Peadar O'Donnell led a strike for higher wages and trade union recognition which followed the ITGWU's successful campaign during the Monaghan asylum 'soviet' and prompted the majority Protestant workforce to seek his assistance.⁵¹ The owner, Fulton, was a prominent local businessman, spokesman for the 'leading residents in the Clogher Valley' and an associate of loyalist hardliner and gun-runner Fred Crawford and northern Minister of Home Affairs Dawson Bates.⁵² Crawford claimed that Catholics who struck to remove the mill's (Protestant) foreman had

⁴³*Tyrone Courier*, 4 October 1917; *Tyrone Courier*, 15 November 1917.

⁴⁴Report of the Tyrone County Inspector R.I.C., March 1918; for the number of workers see, Report of the Tyrone County Inspector R.I.C., April 1918; *Dungannon Democrat*, 15 May 1918; *Dungannon Democrat*, 22 May 1918; for details of the second round of prosecutions regarding the Donaghmore strike, see *Tyrone Courier*, 25 April 1918.

⁴⁵*Dungannon Democrat*, 5 June 1918.

⁴⁶Nicholas Smyth (BMH WS 721, 3).

⁴⁷The RIC County Inspector also mentioned a female textile workers' strike in Omagh (CI, August 1918, NAL, CO904/106)

⁴⁸O'Shiel (BMH WS 1770/6, p. 771).

⁴⁹John McCoy (BMH WS 492, p. 42).

⁵⁰CI Tyrone, Jan. 1919 (TNA, CO 904/108).

⁵¹Mary T. McVeigh, 'Lock out? Caledon 1919' in Duíche Neill, ix (1990), 98.

⁵²Wickham to S. J. Watt, 30 Mar. 1922 (PRONI, HA/5/905).

filled servicemen's jobs during the war and alleged that the local Catholic priest, 'the leader of the Sinn Feiners in the district', had organized the strike to persecute Protestants.⁵³

In reality, Fulton's intransigence and poor pay provided the only necessary motivation. The local union secretary was an Orangeman, but O'Donnell later recollected how 'gradually the Union Jacks gave way and the red flags took their place'.⁵⁴ After four weeks, with 130 workers still on strike, Fulton introduced UULA 'blacklegs' and readmitted strikers on a sectarian basis. When the strike eventually collapsed in July 1919 Fulton celebrated by holding a factory social under a banner that read 'Caledon's double celebration: overthrow of the Hun and the Irish Bolsheviks'.⁵⁵

As these examples show, Sinn Fein's social conservatism did not necessarily permeate the ranks. There was clearly a left-wing republican constituency, particularly in East Tyrone in and around Coalisland. After partition, local workers clashed with Sir Samuel Kelly, the Belfast coal magnate, who bought the local colliery, two spinning mills and the brickyard in 1921 and began production in 1924 with two hundred miners from Scotland and the north of England. The Worker's Union was still active, with Neal O'Donnell organising a meeting of 250 in the town addressed by McClung and organising a sympathy strike in nearby Annagher.⁵⁶ The coalmine soon followed suit: the workforce there included a hard core of militants who attempted to create a soviet, precipitating eventual closure.⁵⁷ Kelly also expelled the strikers (led by local republican John McMahan) from the brickworks, bringing in Protestant 'scabs' from Dungannon. Although the strike was organised by the ITGWU, Dawson Gordon addressed the meetings in Coalisland and Dungannon,

which attracted audiences of 250 and three hundred, sharing a platform with William McMullan, Belfast representative of the ITGWU. All the speakers challenged Samuel Kelly, who 'had tried to make the present strike a sectarian issue, for the purpose of dividing the working classes'.⁵⁸ One local republican described the struggle to a friend interned on the *Argenta* prison ship: 'The strike at the brickworks still continues and looks very blue. We are down and out all through the signing of the f**king Treaty!'⁵⁹

In many respects Belfast replicated the rural pattern of revolution and reaction, but the close urban environment acted as a catalyst for confrontation, and there the fire burnt much brighter and more intensely. The same forces that motivated working-class solidarity in Tyrone found potent expression in the Great Belfast Strike: 20,000 shipyard and engineering workers downed tools in January 1919, the high-point of working-class militancy in the period. All-in-all nearly 40,000 workers went out and another 20,000 were laid off because of the strike, which lasted four weeks. By 24 February 1919, the strike ended in failure, largely due to procrastination and timidity on the part of the politically divided strike committee.

In January 1920, the elections to Belfast Corporation demonstrated that the Ulster Unionist Party could secure just 35 of the 60 seats in its own citadel. Nevertheless, both Sinn Féin and the IPP fared relatively badly, securing only five seats apiece. Labour represented the second party in Belfast City Hall, with twelve seats, and attracted support across the sectarian divide. Sam Kyle of the Worker's Union-elected on the Shankill-was a Connollyite socialist, but other councillors held a more ambiguous attitude to partition. The seeds of this ambiguity can be traced back to the Great

⁵³Crawford diary, 28 Sept. 1920 (PRONI, Crawford papers, D640/11/1).

⁵⁴McVeigh, 'Lock out?', 98-102.

⁵⁵*ibid.* p. 108

⁵⁶RIC IG to MHA, 27 May 1924 (PRONI, HA5/1307)

⁵⁷Rosanne Laury to Joseph Quinn, 8 Sept. 1924 (PRONI, HA/5/1837); strike at Tyrone Brick Works, Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, 1924 (PRONI, HA/5/1361); strike at Annagher Colliery, Coalisland, Co. Tyrone (PRONI, HA/5/1349).

⁵⁸IG RUC to MHA, 8 July 1924 (PRONI, HA/5/1361)

⁵⁹W. McKenna to Cavanagh, 12 Aug. 1924 (PRONI, HA/5/1556).

Strike, which was directed by a committee that included UULA; those committee members outside the ranks of loyalism attempted to hold the ranks together in the face of division by adopting a strictly apolitical position, concentrating solely on reduced working hours.

The Carsonites were not so reticent. The Orange Order issued a manifesto denouncing labour radicalism, and were supported by a relentless campaign from the *Newsletter* and the unionist press. Against the backdrop of a revolutionary upheaval elsewhere in Ireland and in a city where the nationalist minority (then less than a quarter of Belfast's population) had endured harassment and discrimination, the UULA shut down meetings organised by the Left and mobilised its striking members to march behind union jacks. When the Scottish revolutionary and chair of the Clyde Worker's Committee Willie Gallacher spoke in Belfast his talk was interrupted by demands to know whether he 'supported his King'. Gallacher responded, appropriately, that this was a 'stupid question'. 'You know I am a revolutionary and that the only loyalty is to the working-class.' It was a principled response, but one that lost him use of the engineers' hall. Like episodes of working-class unity in Belfast that would follow, the 1919 strike demonstrated both the potential for worker's militancy and the folly in trying to evade the problem of sectarianism. As Michael Farrell concluded, 'there can be few clearer examples in history of the ephemeral effect of purely economic militancy. The greatest labour upheaval in Belfast's history left scarcely a ripple on the political consciousness of the city's workers.'⁶⁰

The reaction against the spectre of workers' unity in Belfast mirrored the sectarianism and menace on display in rural Tyrone, but on the scale and intensity of an urban pogrom. Despite his distaste for Orange platform oratory, characterised by him as 'the unrolling of a mummy. All old bones and rotten rags', Edward Carson played a

central role in precipitating violence through the speech he gave to an Orange gathering at the field in Finaghy on 12 July 1920.⁶¹ 'These men who come forward posing as the friends of labour care no more about labour than does the man in the moon. Their real object ... is that they mislead and bring about disunity amongst our own people; and in the end, before we know where we are, we find ourselves in the same bondage and slavery as is the rest of Ireland in the South and West'. 'And these are not mere words,' he urged. 'I am sick of words without action.'⁶²

One week later the funeral in Banbridge of Colonel Gerald Smyth, divisional police commissioner for Munster who had been assassinated by the IRA in Cork, sparked widespread loyalist violence. Smyth was one of a substantial number of Ulster unionists in the officer class of the police and army who played a prominent role in directing British counterinsurgency in the South, and was an architect of the policy of reprisals. In a speech to his men, he assured them that although they 'may make mistakes occasionally and innocent persons may be shot...that cannot be helped, and you are bound to get the right participants sometimes... The more you shoot the better I will like you, and I assure you, no policeman will get into trouble for shooting any man.' When, after his assassination, southern rail crews refused to transport his body north, loyalists initiated attacks on Catholic homes in Banbridge and neighbouring Dromore.

The Banbridge attacks were part of a pattern over the revolutionary period in which loyalist mobs, often egged on by prominent 'respectable' unionists, carried out wholesale assaults on innocent Catholics in retaliation for IRA actions against police and military figures involved in repression elsewhere in Ireland. In August 1920 the IRA assassinated DI Oswald Swanzy in Lisburn, who with an RIC gang had murdered Tomas MacCurtaín, the Lord Mayor of Cork, and in retaliation loyalists unleashed a pogrom against the town's small

⁶⁰Michael Farrell, 'The Great Belfast Strike of 1919', *The Northern Star*, no.3 (1971).

⁶¹Andrew Gailey, 'King Carson: An Essay on the Invention of Leadership', in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 117 (May, 1996), 85.

⁶²Farrell, *The Orange State*, 28

Catholic minority, razing much of the nationalist quarter over three days and sending many literally fleeing on foot across the mountains to Belfast. A *London Times* reporter insisted that 'the war on Catholics is a deliberate and organised attempt...to drive the Catholic Irish out of north east Ulster.'⁶³

The most horrific reprisals were carried out in Belfast. As trouble spread some 10,000 Catholics and several hundred 'rotten' Protestant trade unionists were expelled from the city's shipyards, mills and foundries.⁶⁴ Over the next two years, 23,000 people were driven from their homes in Belfast, while approximately 50,000 people fled the six-county territory because of intimidation.⁶⁵ The death toll in Belfast alone in the same period numbered 500. Of these almost 60 percent were Catholics in a city where they made up only a quarter of the population.⁶⁶ In effect, as the (unionist) historian Patrick Buckland has argued, 'Belfast Catholics hemmed in by Protestants had long been held hostage for the good behaviour of their co-religionists elsewhere in Ireland.' He might have added that much of the retribution was carried out by state forces whose numbers were drawn from the ranks of loyalist paramilitaries.⁶⁷ One historian of Belfast republicanism suggests, reasonably, that it was the 1920 pogroms that marked the shift in Catholics' allegiance away from Devlin's IPP and toward Sinn Féin. But the violence that accompanied the formation of the Northern Ireland state tested the non-sectarian strain present among Ulster republicans and elevated their role as defenders of the nationalist ghettos.

When confronted with the polarities of unionism and nationalism, working-class Protestants on the whole preferred the devil they knew, and the revolutionary period suggests that Sinn Féin failed to provide a political alternative that could destabilize the unionist monolith. Nevertheless, Protestant support also rested on material conditions. After partition, the post-war de-

pression exacerbated the already likely scenario that employment, both private and public, would become heavily reliant on loyalty, with religious affiliation acting as the primary indicator followed by political trustworthiness. The payoff for preferential treatment in employment, whether a position in the USC, a job in a linen mill or a local government post was that working-class Protestantism was 'stripped of' its 'progressive elements'.⁶⁸ Labour did not lose its power to assert itself, as a new round of confrontation during the Depression years would show. But any struggle that remained trapped within the boundaries of 'unionist labour' was bound to come up short.

Obviously the Sinn Féin movement which emerged after 1916 offered little to working-class Protestants, and arguably diluted the pronounced non-sectarianism and radicalism of its pre-Rising progenitor, due partly to the domination of a counterrevolutionary wing led by Griffith but also-after the 1920 pogroms-to its new ascendancy in nationalist Belfast as 'defenders' against Orange pogroms. Neither were the Protestant lower class passive victims in their own exploitation. But it was undoubtedly the unionist élite who were the net beneficiaries locally.

Imposed by brute force as a means of undermining the potential for thoroughgoing revolution during a period of remarkable upheaval across Ireland, partition consolidated a new arrangement through which capitalism would continue to dominate Ireland north and south. It left intact British imperial prerogatives and drew into the fold a conservative emerging ruling class in the South, while leaving in place a system of sectarian supremacy in the North. Nationalism came up dramatically short in a test of whether it could deliver a future of freedom for the Irish working class, but the revolutionary period should be remembered as one in which working people north and south played a central role in shaping events. The

⁶³McDermott, *Northern Divisions*, 47-49.

⁶⁴Alan F. Parkinson, *Belfast's unholy war* (Dublin, 2004), 36-7.

⁶⁵Phoenix, *Northern nationalism*, 251.

⁶⁶Parkinson, *Unholy war*, 12-13.

⁶⁷Jimmy McDermott, *Northern Divisions*, 11.

⁶⁸Bew et al., *NI*, 16.

'carnival of reaction' foreseen by Connolly continues to the present day, and will not be ended by vague appeals for 'respect' for Ireland's 'two traditions': the challenge is not to accept sectarianism as inevitable, but to carve a path toward its demise. The revolu-

tionary period shows the high cost of letting opportunities slip, but in the joint struggles of workers across the sectarian divide we can also get a glimpse of the potential for transformation.