

# Derry~Londonderry The Ulster Covenant and the 1916 Proclamation

Dr Henry A. Jefferies



12120 - LONDONDERRY



A programme supported by The Peace III Programme managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by the North West Peace III Cluster

# Derry~Londonderry and the Partition of Ireland

## Derry in 1900:

Derry~Londonderry had a population of 40,000 people in 1900. It was typical of many smaller Victorian cities at the time. Its people were rigidly divided by social class, and the divisions were made very clear by the clothes that people wore, the way they spoke and by their general demeanour. Wealthy women strolled about the main streets of Derry in long, elegant dresses designed by couturiers in Paris and London, with their hair piled high upon their heads in the contemporary pompadour or chignon (“waterfall of curls”) fashions, set off with very broad hats. Wealthy men strode about in three piece suits set off by top hats. They often sported beards, and moustaches that were sometimes curled. The lower middle classes bought ready-to-wear factory-made clothes that crudely mimicked the fashions of their betters, but their clothes were plainly cheaper, and were made in practical colours of cloth that would wear well. Poorer people often had to make do with second-hand clothes, sometimes ragged apparel of dark colours that were supposed to hide the dirt.

The first ever film shot in Derry, by Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon in March 1902, shows scenes of people walking in Waterloo Place and Rossville Street. Some posed for the camera, but most were oblivious to the fact that people would be looking at their images on a film long after they had died. The film shows that most people in Derry were reasonably well-fed, but had little money for nice clothes or other luxuries. It was a city with limited job opportunities for men. Its shirt factories, which were scattered around the old heart of the city, made profits by employing women on low wages. At a time when married men were expected to be the ‘bread-winners’ while their wives reared large families of children at home, the lack of jobs for men in Derry was a real problem for society as a whole.

The social class divisions in Derry in 1900 were made worse by religious divisions. The wealthy citizens were mostly Protestants. However, society in Ulster had been shaped profoundly by the British conquest and colonisation of Ireland in which some of the wealth of Ireland had been

taken from its Catholic population and given to Protestant immigrants from England and Scotland. Without wealth, without the access to higher education that only the wealthy could afford at that time, and because of discrimination on religious grounds, it was extremely difficult for Ulster Catholics to claw their way out of poverty. It was not until 1947 that higher education was made free to all and not until 1976 that religious discrimination was outlawed in Northern Ireland. There were, of course, poor Protestants in Ulster as well as Catholics, but being a Catholic in Ulster was an enormous liability when it came to looking for a job, or promotion, until the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Yet, from late Victorian times, things were gradually changing. St Columb’s College (founded in 1879) and the High School (opened in 1887) provided secondary education to a fortunate though tiny minority of Catholic boys and girls respectively, but it would take time before a sizeable Catholic middle class would grow from among their alumni. In Derry, as across Ireland generally, children were educated according to religious denomination. Protestant children fortunate enough to enjoy a secondary education attended either Foyle College (founded in 1617), Victoria High School (founded in 1877)

or St Luarach’s College (founded in 1900). Unfortunately, the education of children in separate schools had the effect of reinforcing already deep divisions in society.

Catholics and Protestants in Derry, as was common in the larger towns and cities across Ulster, lived mostly in separate neighbourhoods, though there were some mixed community districts including, for example, Rosemount, around Northland Road and, of course, on the Waterside. They attended different churches, read different newspapers, nurtured different community identities and in many ways they led very separate lives. That is not to say that there was no interaction between the two communities. They sometimes had neighbours who attended a different church to their own. They might work side by side, and they shared a common affection for their city. They all supported their local soccer team, Derry Celtic. Yet they formed distinct communities defined by religious denominations. Trade unionists in Derry tried to persuade working-class Catholics and Protestants that they had a great deal in common with each other, and that their bosses were their true enemies by paying out paltry wages. However, it was hard to promote socialism in Ireland when religion was such a dominating factor in people’s lives.

## Nationalist Aspirations:

Ireland had been incorporated into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801, in order to copperfasten Britain's control of its rebellious neighbour. Irish Nationalists were Irish men and women who believed that Ireland should be governed by an Irish government elected by the Irish people. That conviction was reinforced by Ireland's catastrophic experience of the Great Famine of 1845-50 – in which one million people died, and another million were forced to emigrate to escape death.

The British government's famine relief measures were woefully inadequate, despite the fact that Britain was the richest country in the world. Nationalists at that time believed that hundreds of thousands of poor Irish men, women and children were simply allowed to die. That belief was confirmed by **The Irish Crisis**, a book written by Sir Charles Trevelyan, the British government's chief official who was responsible for organising famine relief in Ireland. Trevelyan wrote that the famine was created by God to make Ireland a better place in the future – by getting rid of the poor! The sheer scale of death and depopulation was seen as proof of the British government's indifference towards the Irish people. For Nationalists it demonstrated the

necessity of establishing an Irish government.

On the other hand, Nationalists reaped benefits from the United Kingdom becoming increasingly democratic in the second half of the nineteenth century. Growing prosperity allowed more Catholics to have their children



Illustration showing a family during the Famine

educated in school. The easing of sectarian discrimination by the British state allowed Catholics to secure a growing share of jobs in the British civil service, the post office, and the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). However, being an Irish Catholic continued to be a disadvantage when it came to promotion: for example, while 70% of the police constables on the ground were Catholics, most of the senior police officers were Protestants even as late as 1914.

The Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), of which 86 of Ireland's 105 MPs, were members in 1885, campaigned tirelessly against religious discrimination, for equal job opportunities, and for the better governance of Ireland from Westminster. Its central demand, however, was for Home Rule. This was a form of devolved government for Ireland within the United Kingdom. Under Home Rule there would have been an Irish government in Dublin responsible for law making in economic matters, education, policing and justice – while Ireland would remain subject to the British government's control in imperial

matters such as taxation, foreign policy, the Royal Mail and the military. The leaders of the IPP stated in parliament that Home Rule was a compromise arrangement that would satisfy Nationalists' demands for an Irish government that would govern Ireland in the best interests of the Irish people, while at the same time leaving Ireland as part of the United Kingdom subject to the British crown.

In 1910 two general elections resulted in a stalemate between Britain's two main political parties, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party. John Redmond, leader of the IPP, gave his party's support to Herbert Asquith, leader of the Liberal Party, to be the prime minister - on condition that the Liberals promised to grant Home Rule to Ireland. With the votes of the Liberal Party, the Irish Parliamentary Party and the new Labour Party behind it, Ireland looked set to achieve Home Rule.

## Unionist Anxieties:

Unionists were Irish men and women who supported the Act of Union that created the United Kingdom in 1801. They wanted Ireland to remain united with Great Britain. Most of them were Protestants who traced their ancestry to 'British' immigrants who had come to Ireland since the early 17th Century. Unionists felt proud to be British, and they took great pride in the outstanding achievements of Victoria's Britain in terms of culture, industry, technology and empire. Ulster Unionists pointed to the remarkable industrial revolution experienced in Belfast since the Union, as proof of their own innate abilities and application to industry. Unionists were worried that Home Rule could destroy all that they had achieved.

For many Protestants the steady advancement of Catholics in Victorian Ireland was unsettling. It could be seen reflected in solid form in the new Catholic churches, convents and schools built across the country. It was reflected in Nationalists' confidence in expressing their political points of view in criticising the status quo and in the sweeping victories of the IPP in election after election. With their usual tally of only 17 MPs, out of Ireland's 105 constituencies, Ulster Unionists were certain to form a very small minority in any Irish parliament

established under Home Rule. Most Protestants were worried about their prospects under an Irish government with a Catholic majority.

Unionists' anxieties about Home Rule were summarized by them in the **Solemn League and Covenant**, a petition signed by half a million Ulster Protestants on 'Ulster Day' in September 1912. The **Covenant** made very clear the central role of religion as a motive force for opposing Home Rule. Its very title implied a contract made between God and his 'chosen people', and it harked back to the Scottish **Solemn League and Covenant** of 1644 whose signatories vowed to defend Presbyterianism against "the treacherous and bloody plots, conspiracies, attempts and practices of the enemies of God against the true religion and professors thereof in all places" in the British isles. Its language echoed the King James Bible. Six of the first nine individuals to sign the **Covenant** were Protestant clergymen. In the **Covenant** the signatories explicitly called on God to support them in their time of 'threatened calamity'.

Many Protestants were anxious that any Irish government made up mostly of Catholics might restrict their religious freedoms; they feared that "Home Rule is Rome Rule". Protestants' fears should be seen

in the context of their long-standing animosity towards the pope in Rome. However, they should also be seen in the context of Nationalists' demands for equal opportunities in securing jobs and promotions; in an economy that failed to generate enough employment and wealth for everyone, many Protestants feared that any progress made towards equal opportunities would only be made at their expense.

The Ulster **Covenant** identified Unionists' anxieties about the 'material well-being of Ulster, and the rest of Ireland', as another key reason for their opposition to Home Rule. Essentially, they were afraid that a new Irish government, elected mostly by farmers, might mismanage the Irish economy and cause the collapse of industries in Ulster which had prospered since the Union with Great Britain. Anxieties about the possible threat to the economy united Protestant businessmen and their employees against Home Rule.

Despite the fact that Home Rule would have left Ireland within the United

Kingdom – just like Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland today – Ulster Unionists expressed their anxiety in the Covenant that Home Rule threatened their 'cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom'. The Unionists knew that most Irish Nationalists wanted Ireland to be free of British control, and they were afraid that the Nationalists would use Home Rule as a stepping stone towards Irish independence at some point in the future.

Nationalist politicians, and particularly John Redmond, tried to reassure Unionists with soothing words. Redmond genuinely believed that Ireland with Home Rule would be better off in the United Kingdom than as an independent state. However, Catholics' slow and fitful progress towards equal rights and their demands for equal opportunities, fuelled Protestants' fears and strengthened a 'siege mentality' that was hostile to any hint of 'surrender'.



## Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant.

**B**eing 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 Ireland. ¶ And in the event of such a Parliament being forced upon us we further solemnly and mutually pledge ourselves to refuse to recognise its authority. ¶ In sure confidence that God will defend the right we hereto subscribe our names. ¶ And further, we individually declare that we have not already signed this Covenant.

The above was signed by me at \_\_\_\_\_  
"Ulster Day," Saturday, 28th September, 1912.

— God Save the King. —

### Home Rule Crisis:

In April 1912 Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, submitted a Home Rule bill to the British parliament. John Redmond, and Nationalists generally, were confident that Ireland would have Home Rule by the summer of 1914 and that the Irish people would thereafter be able to shape their own destinies. For Unionists, however, the prospect of Home Rule was seen as the beginning of Armageddon. Hence, while Nationalists were content to wait passively over the next couple of years, Unionists geared up to fight for their very survival.

In 1910 the Ulster Unionists appointed Sir Edward Carson to lead them in the fight against Home Rule. Carson, a Dublin Protestant, brought his fierce passion, outstanding oratory and his close connections with the British Conservative Party to the Unionist cause. His intention was to stop any part of Ireland getting Home Rule, but he knew that most people in Britain accepted the Nationalists' arguments. Instead, Carson focused on Home Rule's greatest weakness; the fact that most people in Ulster were opposed to Home Rule. Carson's plan was to confront Nationalists with a choice: either to forget about Home Rule, or risk having Ireland partitioned in two.

Carson's hand was not so very strong at first. Only 54% of the people in Ulster were Protestants, and Unionists usually elected only 17 of Ulster's 33 MPs. However, Carson succeeded in creating an impression in British minds that Ulster was both Protestant and Unionist. Together with his deputy, Sir James Craig, a wealthy businessman from north Down, Carson mobilised Unionist opposition in Ulster, and fostered support for the Ulster Unionist cause in Britain. Carson and Craig were fortunate to enjoy the support of the Orange Order and Apprentice Boys in Ulster. They also enjoyed the backing of Andrew Bonar Law, the leader of the Conservative Party, whose family came from Coleraine. Bonar Law was more determined in his commitment to the Ulster Unionists than any Conservative leader was before or since. In a speech in July 1912 he promised to support whatever actions the Unionists might deem necessary in the fight against Home Rule - including the use of violence.

Under Carson's leadership the Ulster Unionists used the wealth of Belfast's businessmen and their expertise in marketing to promote their cause in Britain. The **Solemn League and Covenant** was signed by half a million Protestants, 228,000 women and 218,000 men, some of them with their



Carson signing the Covenant "Ulster Day" 1912

own blood in a demonstration of their deadly earnestness.

Yet the signing of the **Covenant** was amplified by the way the Unionist leadership staged the event for British journalists and news photographers, and even had it filmed for British audiences in the new cinemas that were springing up at the time. A tsunami of picture postcards, pamphlets and a stream of speech-making across British constituencies reinforced the Ulster Unionists' central message: that Ulster opposed Home Rule.

In the **Solemn League and Covenant** the male signatories threatened to "use all means that may be found necessary" to fight Home Rule. In January 1913 that implicit threat of violence was given physical form with the establishment of a Unionist paramilitary organisation; the Ulster Volunteer Force. The UVF was led and organised by former British Army officers under Lieutenant General Sir George Richardson. It recruited 100,000 Protestant men into its ranks. In April 1914 the UVF illegally imported 24,000 rifles and 3 million bullets from Germany into Larne, County Antrim. Who the guns would

be used against was never made clear.

The Derry County Division of the UVF had 5,365 volunteers in 1914 under the command of Colonel Sir Hervey Bruce, while the City of Derry Division had 3,480 volunteers under the command of Captain Marshall Morris. The failure of the British government to enforce the law against the Unionist paramilitaries, even after the massive importation of weapons, persuaded more and more constitutionalist Nationalists that British politicians were not to be trusted. In November 1913 a Nationalist paramilitary organisation called the Irish Volunteers was established under the leadership of Eóin MacNéill, an Ulster Nationalist, to counter the threat posed by the UVF and to ensure that Ireland would, as promised, be granted Home Rule. Never before, and never since then, were so many Irishmen, Unionists and Nationalists alike, members of paramilitary organisations!

Whereas in 1912 the Unionists and their Conservative Party allies were strident in opposing Home Rule for all of Ireland, by the time of the Buckingham Palace conference in July 1914 they accepted that at least 26 Irish counties would have Home Rule. They limited their demands to

six Ulster counties which they wanted to be excluded from Home Rule forever.

In 1912 Irish Nationalists confidently expected that all of Ireland would be granted Home Rule, but by 1914 the leaders of the IPP agreed that the four Irish counties with a Protestant majority – Antrim, Down, Armagh and Londonderry – could be excluded from Home Rule, at least for a six-year period. The Buckingham Palace conference ended without agreement. No settlement could possibly satisfy both Nationalists and Unionists, yet Asquith hoped to satisfy as many people of both communities as was possible given Ulster's complex religious geography. He was thinking of placing Nationalist areas in south Down and south Armagh under Home Rule, while excluding Unionist areas in north Fermanagh and south Tyrone.

The outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 led to the passing of the Government of Ireland Act, which granted Home Rule, with two provisos: the long-awaited government for Ireland would only be established after the War had ended, and 'special provision' was to be made to settle the outstanding disputes concerning Ulster

## The Great War:

The Great War began in August 1914 with the German invasion of Belgium and France. Their plans were opposed by Britain, France and Russia. It turned out to be a cataclysmic war, yet many of the young men who volunteered to become soldiers believed that the war would be over by Christmas 1914. Few people expected the war to drag on for more than four years, or that 10 million men would die before the guns eventually fell silent.

In 1914 Ireland's political leaders saw Irish involvement in the war as a moral obligation since Ireland was part of the British Empire, but also as an opportunity to strengthen their own political agendas. For John Redmond, the men of Ireland had an opportunity to prove themselves as loyal subjects since Home Rule had, virtually, been granted. He hoped that in fighting against a common enemy Irishmen of all political opinion would be able to put their differences behind them. Of course, he was also conscious of the "special provision" to be negotiated for Ulster once the war was over, and he wanted Nationalists to have a strong bargaining hand. For Carson there was the same mix of motives; a sense of obligation to support the British empire in a war

that could endanger its very survival, as well as an opportunity to prove Ulster Protestants' loyalty to king and country. Carson also hoped to be in a strong bargaining position when it came to negotiating about the future of Ulster after the war.

On the outbreak of war 58,000 Irish men were already serving in the British Army. A further 130,000 Irish joined the British military forces during the course of the war. 26,000 of these were former members of the Ulster Volunteer Force, while 24,000 were Irish Volunteers. Yet it is striking that the great majority of Ireland's paramilitaries decided not to fight in the Great War. Of the new Irish recruits to the British Army, 55% were Catholics. Many of these served in the 16th (Irish) Division and the 10th (Irish) Division.

About a quarter of the Ulster Volunteer Force volunteered for service in the Great War. They formed the core of the 36th (Ulster) Division. The 10th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, part of the 36th Division, were commonly known as 'The Derries' because many of them used to be members of the City of Derry and the County Derry divisions of the UVF.



Irish Volunteers in Derry

On 13 May 1915 'The Derries' were paraded in the centre of Londonderry, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Ross Smith of Ardmore. They must have looked confident, and smart in their uniforms. However, nothing could have prepared them for the realities of fighting in the Great War.

On 1 July 1916 the 36th Division took part in the major British offensive against the Germans in the Battle of the Somme. By the end of that day 2,000 Ulster men had been killed and another 3,500 had been injured. Of the 764 'Derries' who fought in the battle on that day,

only 346 were fit for duty on the following morning. The Battle of the Somme dragged on until November, when the British finally gave up their hopes for a breakthrough. The Battle of the Somme ended in stalemate. 146,431 allied soldiers were killed at the Somme, and 164,055 Germans. The sacrifice of the Ulster men in the Battle of the Somme has been commemorated within Northern Ireland ever since. It is regarded as a telling counter-point to the sacrifice made by Irish Republicans in Dublin at Easter of that same year.

The 10th (Irish) Division had already suffered its share of casualties at

Gallipoli in 1915, as had the 16th (Irish) Division at the Battles of Guillemont and Ginchy at the Somme. All three divisions from Ireland suffered further heavy losses in other bloody battles of the Great War. By the time it ended, on 11 November 1918, it is estimated that somewhere between 30,000 and 35,000 Irish men had lost their lives in the Great War. Perhaps another 60,000 to 70,000 Irish soldiers were seriously injured in the war but survived, sometimes left blinded, crippled or insane. The appalling casualty rates dampened enthusiasm for volunteering to fight in the war: whereas 75,342 Irish men joined

### 1916 Rising:

On the eve of the Great War most Nationalists accepted the Home Rule compromise – they were willing to accept that Ireland would remain part of the United Kingdom, as long as an Irish government was established that was elected by and answerable to the Irish people. Yet recent studies have revealed that the idea of Home Rule inspired no great enthusiasm among Nationalists; their instincts were republican: they wanted Ireland to be free from British control. Irish Unionists recognised the instinctive separatism of their Nationalist neighbours. That is a major reason

the British Army in the first twelve months of the war, only 29,124 did so in the following year, 13,785 in the next and 12,362 in the next.

The survivors of the Great War who returned to Ireland found it to be a very different country to that which they had left. The men of the 36th (Ulster) Division had monuments erected in their memory in towns across the new state of Northern Ireland, established in 1921. However, the men of the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions found little appreciation for their efforts among a radicalised Nationalist community.

why the Unionists opposed the compromise inherent in Home Rule – they were afraid that Home Rule would become a stepping stone towards Irish independence some time in the future. However, it must be emphasised that before 1916 there was no Nationalist expectation that Ireland would be allowed by Britain to become a republic.

The 1916 Rising took virtually everybody by surprise. Yet it proved to be a major turning-point in Irish history: before it most Nationalists had been Home Rulers, after it most of them became Republicans. The men who planned the Rising were a small

clique within the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), or Fenians as they were commonly known. They saw the Great War as a chance to strike a blow for Irish freedom – seeing “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity”. In all probability there would have been no Rising but for the war.

Before the Home Rule crisis the number of militant Republicans in Ireland was very small, numbering hundreds rather than thousands. However it has been argued that Carson’s success in raising the UVF to fight Home Rule undermined peaceful constitutional politics and suggested to some Nationalists that violent rebellion could offer an alternative approach. Patrick Pearse, who was a peaceful Home Ruler until 1913, was inspired by Carson and the UVF to become a Republican advocate of violence.

The 1916 Rising was staged as a demonstration of Irish determination to secure an independent republic. Patrick Pearse, the leader of the Rising, read a **Proclamation** to the people of Ireland outside the General Post Office in the centre of Dublin that outlined the guiding principles of Irish republicans. The **Proclamation** declared “the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of

Irish destinies, to be sovereign and infeasible”. It proclaimed “the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State”, guaranteed “religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens”, and declared its resolve to promote “the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past”. The Proclamation placed “the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God”. Republicans, like Unionists, enlisted God in their wars!

The 1916 **Proclamation** is a clear statement of republican principles, the same principles as those of the American **Declaration of Independence** (1776) and the French **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen** (1789). It declared every Irish man and woman’s right to liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness. It sought to address Protestants’ fears by guaranteeing religious and civil freedom and promising equal opportunities. On the other hand, it made no concessions to Unionists’ British identity. It demanded the allegiance of all people in Ireland to the republic.

On the Saturday before Easter 1916 40 Irish Volunteers from Derry, under the command of Séamus Cavanagh, assembled in a shed at Watt's Distillery to play their part in the Rising, but the Volunteers' leader, Eóin Mac Néill, ordered his men to 'stand down' and the Derry volunteers dispersed without firing a shot. The Rising went ahead in Dublin without them on Easter Monday. The initial reaction of Nationalists in Derry to the 1916 Rising was "cool and sensible" according to the **Derry Journal**. On 3 May 1916 the **Derry Journal** reported that the British authorities in Dublin "have succeeded in suppressing disturbance and restoring order. This is highly satisfactory". This muted reaction to the Rising among Nationalists in Derry, was typical across Ulster generally.

Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising, following the savage British Army backlash and the execution of the rebel leaders, there was a decisive shift in Nationalist sentiment against British rule. To stem the tide towards republicanism the British government offered to grant Home Rule to 26 counties immediately. John Redmond was persuaded to agree – but only after he was promised that partition would be temporary. However, it was soon discovered that Carson, the

Unionist leader, had also been given a guarantee that partition would, in fact, be permanent. Nationalists' trust in the government was destroyed, along with their confidence in Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party. Nationalists began to look elsewhere for political leadership. On 20 July 1916 Charles McHugh, Catholic bishop of Derry, established the Anti-Partition League to campaign against the threatened partition of Ireland.

In 1917 Sinn Féin was transformed into a republican party and it won massive support from Irish Nationalists. In August 1917 the Pearse Sinn Féin Club (named after the leader of the 1916 Rising) was established in Derry. In the general election of 1918 Eóin Mac Néill, the founder of the Irish Volunteers, was elected as the Sinn Féin MP for Londonderry. He was one of 73 Sinn Féin MPs elected, alongside 26 Unionists and 6 members of the Irish Parliamentary Party. The election signalled that Home Rule no longer held any appeal for Irish Nationalists: most now wanted a republic that was entirely free of Britain. On the other hand, the election also showed the strength of Unionism in Ulster.

In local elections in January 1920 Nationalists won control of Londonderry Corporation. Hugh C.

O'Doherty was elected as the first Catholic mayor of Londonderry. The **Derry Journal** headline declared, "No surrender' citadel conquered after centuries of oppression". The Union flag was no longer flown over

the Guildhall, and the new council declared its intention to represent all of the citizens equally. However, the city remained deeply divided between the two communities.

## Partition:

Sinn Féin's MPs met together in Dáil Éireann, the republican parliament for Ireland, in January 1919. They endorsed the 1916 **Proclamation** and declared that Ireland was a republic, whose sovereignty rested with the Irish people. However, the British government had no intention of surrendering control of Ireland without a fight. The army of the self-proclaimed republic, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), launched a guerrilla war against British rule. IRA violence was particularly concentrated across the south west of Ireland and Dublin. Derry played no important part in Ireland's War of Independence, but the war made its mark on Nationalists and Unionists in Derry.

In mid-April 1920 a number of Republican prisoners were brought to Derry's City Jail. A crowd of Sinn Féin supporters chanted republican songs and waved tricolours to give heart to the prisoners. An opposing crowd

of Unionists sang "Rule Britannia" and "Dolly's Brae" and waved Union Jacks. Soon the singing contest was replaced with rioting between the two sides that lasted for an hour. Tensions in the city escalated in an alarming fashion over the following weeks.

The appalling sectarian violence suffered in Belfast in 1920 and 1921 was echoed in Derry. In June 1920 the UVF in Londonderry launched an attack on Catholic residents in the Bogside. The **Derry Journal** reported



GPO Dublin Easter 1916

**POBLACHT NA H EIREANN.**  
**THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT**  
OF THE  
**IRISH REPUBLIC**  
**TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.**

**IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN** In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty, six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government,

THOMAS J. CLARKE,  
SEAN Mac DIARMADA, THOMAS MacDONAGH,  
P. H. PEARSE, EAMONN CEANNT,  
JAMES CONNOLLY, JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

that "Derry was on Saturday night the scene of appalling bloodshed and brutality following a wild outburst by Unionists who, armed with rifles and revolvers, turned some streets of the city into a veritable shambles. At least three men were shot dead and many persons, including a baby in [its mother's] arms, were wounded." The president of St Columba's College asked the IRA to protect the school from a UVF gang. Eight Catholics and four Protestants were killed in the encounter.

On 23 June 1920 the British Army intervened to stifle the escalating violence. 1,500 British soldiers were sent into the city and they imposed a curfew. The British Army and the UVF worked together to impose control over the city; six more Catholics were killed in the unrest. Indeed in November 1920 some members of the UVF were recruited into the newly formed Ulster Special Constabulary (USC, of whom the 'B Specials' became the most notorious). However, the two communities were too evenly matched in Derry for any kind of pogrom, like that attempted in Belfast. In Derry about 40 people were killed during the 1920s 'Troubles', only a small fraction of the number killed in Belfast.

To address the worsening political crisis the British parliament enacted

the Government of Ireland Act (1920). It authorised the creation of a new state called Northern Ireland. It was formed from six Ulster counties that together had a population of one million Protestants and half a million Catholics. Northern Ireland was to remain part of the United Kingdom, but it was granted a form of devolved government subject to the British parliament. In May 1921 a general election was held for the new Northern Irish parliament. Given the Protestant majority in the six counties, Unionists won the election convincingly. In June 1921 the first Northern Irish government was established, with Sir James Craig as its first prime minister. However, the inclusion of a very large Catholic Nationalist minority, against their will, in the new Northern Irish state created grave instability right from the start.

Once Northern Ireland was established and the Ulster Unionists were settled to their own satisfaction, the British government negotiated a political settlement with Sinn Féin for the rest of Ireland. Under the terms of the **Anglo-Irish Treaty** of December 1921 twenty six Irish counties left the United Kingdom to form a separate state, the Irish Free State. The Irish Free State was allowed to have its own government with full powers over a range of functions; including

law making, taxation, policing and the army. In physical form you could see the independence enjoyed in the Irish Free State as the Gardaí Síochána replaced the Royal Irish Constabulary on the streets and the Irish Army replaced the British Army in the barracks. The Irish tricolour replaced the Union flag flying over public buildings. The post office boxes were painted green. However, the Irish Free State had to remain within the British Empire, and the king of England was its head of state. It was a compromise arrangement that split Sinn Féin and the IRA in two and led to a vicious civil war. It was not until March 1923 that peace finally came to the Irish Free State.

While the Irish Free State was torn by civil war, the Unionist government in Belfast moved to impose its authority across Northern Ireland. Proportional representation was abolished and

changes to the franchise reduced the electorate by 250,000 for local elections. New constituencies were created which gave Unionist politicians control of all local councils, even in places where most of the people were Nationalists. The Unionist government was accused of gerrymandering, particularly in Derry where the Corporation was returned to Unionist control in 1923 against the wishes of the majority of its voters. Control over the Corporation allowed Unionists to discriminate in favour of Protestants in terms of employment, housing and in representing the city. Londonderry Corporation became the worst example of local government in Northern Ireland until it was finally abolished under pressure from the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in 1968.

## Epilogue:

Partition left the Irish Free State as a virtually homogenous Nationalist Catholic state which was free to promote its ideals of fashioning an 'Irish' Ireland. Indeed, the Protestant minority in the Free State shrank from 7.5% of the population to only 3% over the following four decades. For many Protestants emigration offered an escape from the violence of the War of Independence and then the Civil War in Ireland. Others left for better economic opportunities. However, many Unionists went to live in other parts of the British Empire, such as Canada or the United Kingdom itself, where their British identity could be maintained more freely. The Irish

constitution of 1937 and an act of Dáil Éireann in 1949 marked the Irish Free State's evolution into the Republic of Ireland. Successive Irish governments complained about the partition of Ireland, but they failed to devise an effective policy or strategy to improve relations with their Northern neighbours. For their part, successive British governments were happy simply to forget about 'the Irish Question' until the 'Troubles' erupted in 1969.

Life in Derry~Londonderry after the formation of Northern Ireland in 1921 was blighted by tense divisions between its Nationalist and Unionist populations. Unionists in Londonderry felt very much under siege, both from the growing



Strand Road Derry~Londonderry 1920

Catholic majority within the city who resented the Unionists' stranglehold of the city's economy and power structures, and also from the southern Irish state that claimed jurisdiction over Northern Ireland. Unionists were inclined to accept anti-partitionist rhetoric from Irish governments at face value. They saw the Irish state trying to create an Irish-speaking Ireland, and they saw that the Catholic Church enjoyed a 'special position' across the border. The gulf separating Ulster Unionists from southern Nationalists grew ever wider after partition.

Nationalists in Derry desperately hoped that the Boundary Commission established under the terms of the **Anglo-Irish Treaty** of 1921 would transfer Derry City, along with other Nationalist areas in Northern Ireland, to the Irish Free State. However, the commission actually recommended that parts of County Donegal bordering on Derry be returned to the United Kingdom! The commission's report was suppressed at the Irish government's request, and the border was left where it stood. Nationalists in Derry found themselves abandoned by the Irish Free State and

regarded as enemies by Unionists in Northern Ireland. Unemployment, poverty, limited access to education and powerlessness were hallmarks of being a Catholic in Derry over the decades that followed. Yet, the virtual collapse of Northern Ireland's industrial economy after the Great War meant that there were many Protestants too who suffered from dreadful living conditions.

As one looks around Derry ~Londonderry today one sees a city which has experienced remarkable progress in terms of people's living standards and lifestyles, access to education and employment opportunities and in the general physical environment of the city. Community relations have improved greatly since the onset of peace. There remains a very great deal to achieve in the city before we can be satisfied that all of the people of Derry ~Londonderry enjoy good and happy lives. Nonetheless, we have progressed from where our forebears stood in 1900 and we can be confident that the lives of the citizens of our city will get much, much better in the future.

## Bibliography:

Paul Bew: **Ideology and the Irish**

**Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism** (Oxford, 1996)

Francis Costello: **The Irish Revolution and its Aftermath, 1916-1923** (Dublin, 2002)

Diaramid Ferriter: **The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000** (London, 2005)

David Harkness: **Northern Ireland since 1920** (Dublin, 1983)

Alvin Jackson: **Ireland, 1798-1998** (Oxford, 1999)

Michael Laffan: **The Resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin Party, 1916-1923** (Cambridge, 1999)

Cornelius O'Leary and Patrick Maume: **Controversial Issues in Anglo-Irish Relations, 1910-1921** (Dublin, 2004)

A.T.Q. Stewart: **The Ulster Crisis: Resistance to Home Rule, 1912-1914** (London, 1967)

Charles Townshend: **Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion** (London, 2005)

[www.bbc.co.uk/history](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history)

**Dr Henry A. Jefferies** is the Head of History at Thornhill College, Derry. He is the author of several books, including *A2 History: Partition of Ireland, 1900-25* (Abingdon, 2011), *The Irish Church and the Tudor Reformations* (Dublin, 2010), *A new history of Cork* (Dublin, 2010) and he was the senior editor of *History of the diocese of Derry* (Dublin, 2000), *Tyrone: history and society* (Dublin, 2000).



This booklet represents the views of the author and not necessarily the views of Derry City Council



A programme supported by The Peace III Programme managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by the North West Peace III Cluster