Conflict in 19th Century Ireland

The development of Unionism and Nationalism

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Chapter 1

The Act of Union

The Act of Union encompassed two identical measures passed in 1800 by the British and Irish Parliaments. It took effect from 1 January 1801 and joined Britain and Ireland together in the United Kingdom. The act abolished the Irish Parliament, which occupied the present Bank of Ireland building in Dublin’s College Green. Thereafter, one hundred Irish MPs sat in the House of Commons at Westminster, while twenty-eight Irish peers and four Church of Ireland bishops took their seats in the House of Lords. The act also included interim arrangements to adjust trade tariffs between the two countries, and these were gradually phased out altogether, leading to the establishment of free trade from 1824. The impact made by these financial changes was negligible, and they merely accelerated the advance of an economic union between the two countries, which was already taking shape in the second half of the eighteenth century. Even politically, there was considerable continuity with the pre-Union era. While the removal of the Dublin Parliament provided an obvious break, the whole complex machinery of the Castle administration not only remained in place but was substantially increased over the course of the nineteenth century. Clearly, Ireland would not follow the Scottish example and become fully integrated into the United Kingdom system of government.

The chief architect of the Union, William Pitt, the Prime Minister, had indicated that the Union would allow Irish problems to be tackled in a more efficient and sympathetic manner. Ireland would, he argued, enjoy all the benefits that would automatically flow from her new relationship with Britain. Indeed, Pitt had been a consistent advocate of a legislative union between Britain and Ireland, believing that it offered the only really long-term solution to Ireland’s difficulties. The Union, therefore, was not
a knee-jerk reaction to the events of 1798, when a serious rebellion in Ireland had momentarily diverted British attention during the great turn-of-the-century conflict with revolutionary France. Instead, Pitt seized on the opportunity presented by the rebellion to bring forward his scheme for a Union. Still, Pitt’s attempt to bring stability to Ireland was also dictated by wider imperial concerns. For the governing elite at Westminster the rebellion in 1798 had confirmed that Irishmen could no longer be left to manage their own affairs. Irish instability now threatened British security, and Pitt had little difficulty in persuading the House of Commons to support a new form of direct rule, though the lack of real attention given to Irish problems by the cabinet in London was to become a recurring theme during the course of the nineteenth century.

The events of 1798 had also concentrated the minds of Irish Protestants. Nearly 10,000 people had been killed during the rebellion, and to many onlookers in Ireland the violence had all the characteristics of a civil war. Pitt sought, therefore, to exploit this sudden feeling of Protestant vulnerability in order to garner support for his Union project among the country’s decision-makers. Yet their simplistic view of the rebellion as a shocking example of Catholic disloyalty, and one that could be repeated, concealed the true nature of the insurrection. Ireland had witnessed a serious rebellion in 1798 when perhaps as many as 50,000, in places as far apart as Counties Antrim and Wexford, fought to turn Ireland into a democratic republic free from British influence. While all the participants could subscribe to this general aim, it was apparent that they had been motivated by a number of very different factors. The United Irishmen, as their name suggests, saw Presbyterians in the north join forces with Catholics in the south. This collaboration contributed to the complex mix of urban political radicalism, which had been influenced by recent revolutionary events in America and France, and serious agrarian unrest, based on the secret society tradition in rural Ireland, together with a strong conspiratorial element at the heart of the United Irish leadership. All of these combined to produce an insurrection in 1798. Crucially, the conspirators had colluded with revolutionary France and, though a small French invasion force had successfully landed in County Mayo, swift action by the British fleet prevented the main body of French troops from reaching Irish shores.

For Westminster, therefore, an immediate concern was the need to
prevent a further invasion attempt. These events ensured that the long-term better government of Ireland was not the sole objective when Westminster embarked on its Union project. Fears of a fresh invasion attempt and the need to protect its Irish flank exerted a powerful influence on British thinking. Britain had been at war with France since 1793, and Pitt knew that the French could exploit further unrest in Ireland by launching an invasion, either to divert British attention away from the war on the continent or to provide a bridgehead for a subsequent invasion of the mainland. In these circumstances the Union was the surest way of returning Ireland to stability and reducing the prospect of another invasion attempt.

The occasion of the 1798 rebellion provided Pitt with the opportunity to press the case for a Union. In doing so Pitt repeatedly reminded members of the Protestant Ascendancy, the landowning elite which had dominated Irish society in the eighteenth century, that their survival depended on the security offered by the British state, something that could be more effectively delivered if the two countries were united under a single government. The 1798 rebellion had clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of the Ascendancy class in the face of a popular uprising and its dependence on British forces for protection. Indeed, the British had acted swiftly and decisively in suppressing the rebellion. An elaborate spy network had ensured that the revolutionary movement was kept under tight surveillance, and key leaders were already in custody when the insurrection began. An effective campaign of terror during 1797, led by the army, had already weakened the United Irish organisation in Ulster. Thereafter, a savage military response to the outbreak of revolutionary violence in 1798, followed by systematic and brutal repression, guaranteed a crushing victory for government forces. Significantly, during these engagements the Irish yeomanry, an almost exclusively Protestant force with a strong Orange Order influence, acquired a savage reputation for indiscipline and sectarian violence. Raised in 1796 to meet the twin threat of internal rebellion and foreign intervention, the yeomanry acted as the government’s military spearhead in Ireland. Both during and after the rebellion members of the yeomanry were implicated in numerous murders and arson attacks on a large number of Catholic churches. By 1799, with its membership rising to 66,000, the yeomanry contributed to the growing impression that repression would become a key feature of British rule in Ireland.

As Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Castlereagh took responsibility for
steering the Union legislation through the Irish Parliament. In his efforts to persuade the Protestant Ascendancy, whose members dominated the Parliament in Dublin, to back the idea of a legislative union, Castlereagh made effective use of the patronage system. New titles were created for a number of Irish MPs, while more were generously compensated in other ways, and this guaranteed a measure of support for the new initiative. However, more Irish MPs were convinced by Pitt's argument that only direct control from Westminster could restore firm government to Ireland and look after the long-term interests of the Ascendancy class. In the wake of the 1798 rebellion, this view was decisive in securing a majority for the Union in the Irish Parliament. Not surprisingly, those members of the Ascendancy who favoured a legislative union were primarily motivated by self-interest. Previously, the Irish Parliament had been successful in defending Protestant privileges, but a growing number of the Ascendancy class now believed that this task could be more effectively met by the Parliament in London which was, of course, familiar with the relevant religious arguments. Ironically, a majority of the educated Catholic middle class also favoured a legislative union, believing that it offered the best prospect for the amelioration of Catholic grievances. This had been the message that the British government had been transmitting, as it actively encouraged Catholics to believe that the Act of Union would be followed quickly by legislation which would finally concede Catholic emancipation. Pitt had intended that legislation granting Catholic emancipation would accompany the Act of Union, but he dropped this idea once it became clear that the introduction of such a controversial measure would create major difficulties in both Britain and Ireland. Still, Catholics were hopeful that their claims for just treatment would receive a more sympathetic hearing in the Westminster Parliament, and early progress on this issue was expected. Moreover, Catholic support for the Union was a significant factor in determining the measure's ultimate success.

In addition to the security aspect, Pitt also hoped that the Union would consolidate British control over Ireland and, simultaneously, would improve Anglo-Irish relations by removing the risk of a serious conflict between the Parliaments in London and Dublin. Friction between the two Parliaments was scarcely concealed, and the likelihood of a major constitutional clash had grown significantly in the second half of the eighteenth century. In this period two particular features influenced the development of Irish
Although O'Connell claimed to have exposed the Young Ireland movement's ambivalent attitude towards political violence, it was impossible to envisage these idealistic romantic nationalists engaging in rebellion. Nevertheless, excited by examples of revolution in Europe in 1848 and stung into action by the horrors of the famine, a number of these Young Irelanders stumbled into a confused and futile insurrection. Like the two earlier examples of armed revolution, the 1848 uprising proved a hopeless failure but, taken together, these rebellions established a revolutionary tradition in Irish nationalism and provided an inspiration to later generations of violent nationalists. The 1798 rebellion had been on a much bigger scale and it marked the birth of revolutionary nationalism. The participants in 1798 had sought to establish an independent republic by force of arms, but the insurrection was very badly coordinated and local grievances often acted as a stimulus for rebellion. Two other factors present in 1798 also influenced the course of Irish nationalism. Firstly, the rising had grown out of a form of nationalism which could be described as constitutional separatism, and violence was only contemplated as a last, and hopeless, resort when more conventional political avenues had been closed. This had been a feature in the years immediately preceding 1798, when the radicalising influence of the United Irishmen was suddenly curbed by government repression. Secondly, in spite of heavy northern Presbyterian participation, there were obvious sectarian motives at work in 1798 and, consequently, revolutionary nationalism was equated with Catholic disloyalty in Irish Protestant eyes. This was in spite of the fact that the 1803 rising was actually led by Protestants.

In many ways, the 1803 insurrection led by Robert Emmet was a direct
result of the 1798 rebellion. Expelled from Trinity College for his radical views, the young Emmet spent two years in France attempting to secure further military support for a fresh uprising. When this proved unsuccessful, he returned to Ireland and soon engaged with other veterans of 1798 in the planning of a new rising, somehow emerging as the leading conspirator. His plan was to seize Dublin Castle and other important buildings in the capital, a move which, he hoped, would spark a more widespread rebellion in the country at large. What followed, on Saturday 23 July 1803, was a confusing episode, bordering on chaotic farce, as approximately 300 men took to the streets of Dublin. The military planning was thoroughly inadequate and, with such a small force of untrained men at his command, Emmet, who proved a hesitant commander, chose not to attack Dublin Castle, his original target. The small force had occupied two streets when troops arrived and quickly dispersed the insurgents. Emmet fled to County Wicklow, but was captured in the following month and executed on 20 September. The rising, which claimed the lives of about 50 people, had been a catastrophic military failure and it finished the attempts of the remaining United Irish conspirators to plan a further rising. The number of insurgents had been shockingly low and no spontaneous rising had followed in the rest of the country. In spite of its abject failure, however, the 1803 uprising made an important contribution to revolutionary nationalism in Ireland. In his dramatic plea from the dock, Emmet demanded that his epitaph should only be written when Ireland had won her freedom from Britain. This symbolic gesture provided a powerful inspiration for later generations of nationalists, and what might have been remembered as an embarrassing failure was transformed into a heroic act of patriotism which became embedded in the ideology of militant republicanism. In fact, failure itself became a triumph, as the hopelessness of the entire venture, allied to Emmet’s youthful, almost innocent idealism, made the 1803 debacle more attractive to future groups of violent nationalists.

Despite its legacy, it would be wrong to place too much importance on events such as the 1803 rebellion. Violent nationalism surfaced only sporadically and, on such occasions, it was characterised by a lack of popular support. Indeed, even the idea of a tradition of revolutionary nationalism appears misleading. Ireland did not have such a tradition of violent nationalism, but it did have a tradition of violence in rural society. Sometimes this was due to vague notions of nationalism, but, more
frequently, agrarian unrest was a consequence of local economic grievances. The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the rapid growth of a host of agrarian secret societies which, as they did during the Tithe War, the name given to the anti-tithe protests of the 1830s, spread chaos in rural Ireland and forced the government to respond with coercive legislation. Nationalism, or even politics, was never the motive for such activities, but clashes with the authorities could easily develop a political dimension. Of these secret societies, the Ribbon organisation was easily the most political in character. It also had an urban base, recruiting among the Dublin artisan class, but its members were drawn from most areas of the country. The Ribbonmen had their origins in the Defender tradition of the late eighteenth century. As such, they were openly sectarian, while adhering to a vague concept of revolutionary nationalism. In Ulster, the Ribbonmen frequently participated in sectarian clashes with their opponents in the Orange Order. Yet, while the sporadic violence perpetrated by all of these secret societies became part of the culture of rural society, the link between their activities and violent nationalism was tenuous. Ribbonism did, nevertheless, advance the concept of an independent Ireland achieved by violent insurrection together with a vague assumption of a social revolution to follow. During specific periods, however, particularly in the late 1820s and early 1840s, O’Connell’s militant rhetoric and programme of direct action must have appealed to all shades of militant nationalism, including the various secret societies, thereby demonstrating that there could be considerable overlap between constitutional and revolutionary nationalism. Indeed, during the 1840s, the Young Irelanders made a significant contribution to all three forms of nationalism – constitutional, revolutionary and cultural.

In January 1847 the Young Irelanders who had split with O’Connell formed the Irish Confederation, but it was almost a year before the new body issued a programme outlining its principles. Most importantly, this proclaimed Ireland’s right to self-government and reaffirmed a commitment to non-violent methods, thus following closely the original policy of the Repeal Association. However, these lofty political aspirations were irrelevant to an Ireland gripped by famine. The most prominent member of the Irish Confederation was William Smith O’Brien, a liberal in politics from a Protestant gentry background. An MP since 1828, Smith O’Brien had supported emancipation before being persuaded that repeal of the Union was the only solution to Ireland’s problems. Of course, Smith
O’Brien was exactly the type of high profile convert, a liberal Protestant with aristocratic connections, that O’Connell was seeking. He was quickly elevated to the top rank of the Repeal Association, which he joined in 1843, serving as leader during O’Connell’s term of imprisonment in 1844. Later, Smith O’Brien attempted to heal the divisions between O’Connell and the Young Irelanders but, when the Liberator forced the issue, Smith O’Brien departed with the Young Ireland group to form the Irish Confederation. Influenced by the charismatic Davis, Smith O’Brien wanted to see a reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, which would pave the way for the men of property, such as himself, to play a dominant role in the development of a new form of inclusive nationalism. Only in the last resort, when every other possibility had been exhausted, was Smith O’Brien prepared to contemplate the use of violence for political ends. If the famine sidelined the lofty, idealistic version of Irish nationalism preached by Smith O’Brien, it also encouraged more extreme nationalists on the fringe of the Young Ireland movement who believed that the upheaval in Irish society caused by the agrarian crisis demanded action, and not more political theorising.

Among those who argued that the repeal aim should be abandoned in favour of direct action to save the tenant farming class was James Fintan Lalor. A hitherto obscure figure, who had become associated with the Irish Confederation in 1847, Lalor publicised a programme for agrarian revolution in a number of open letters to the *Nation*. Lalor’s proposals involved concerted action by Ireland’s tenant farmers, who would refuse to pay rents until the landlords accepted the principle of co-ownership between landlord and tenant. While he was not against the idea of the peasantry imposing their will through force of arms, he argued that his idea of ‘moral insurrection’ was more suited to contemporary circumstances and claimed that the famine had already done a great deal to undermine the old land system. Though the famine had, in fact, rendered the possibility of such direct action even less likely, Lalor had made a valuable contribution to Irish nationalism by linking it to the struggle between landlord and tenant. His call for a rent strike by small farmers would, he hoped, create the conditions for a successful social and political revolution. Thus, independence would be complemented by the removal of the landlord class and a shift to peasant proprietorship. While he failed to persuade the Irish Confederation to support his initiative, Lalor managed to convince a leading member, John
The formation of explicitly Unionist organisations began in 1885. With a general election expected and Parnellism threatening to sweep all before it, the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union (ILPU) was founded on 1 May 1885. The initiative had been taken by a small group of southern landowners and academics, whose aim was to coordinate electoral opposition to Home Rule candidates. Among those who were most anxious about the threat of Home Rule and the prospect of Catholic domination were a group of academics from Trinity College, Dublin, traditionally the seat of learning for the Protestant Ascendancy. These men led the initial drive against Parnellism. The group included the Provost of the university, Reverend JH Jellett and two future Provosts, Anthony Traill and JP Mahaffy. Equally concerned by the prospect of Home Rule was a larger body of southern landowners, and a number of these, such as Viscount de Vesci and Lord Castletown, helped to promote the ILPU. Unionism in its earliest organised format, therefore, was a party of education and property. These landowners had been rocked by the agrarian chaos directed by the Land League and by the consequent increase in class tension, and the ILPU, therefore can be partially viewed as a reaction to the land agitation of the 1880s. Moreover, the launch of the ILPU coincided with the formation of a number of groups dedicated to the protection of landlords and their tenants who faced mounting problems in 1885, as instances of boycotting by Parnell’s National League multiplied in certain areas. One of the most important of these landed bodies was the Cork Defence Union, formed on 28 September 1885 at a meeting of landlords organised by AH Smith-Barry, later Lord Barrymore, who was to become a leading figure in Irish unionism. Not surprisingly, there was considerable overlap in membership.
between bodies such as the Cork Defence Union and the ILPU.

In the general election of November–December 1885 the ILPU sought collaboration between Conservatives and Liberals in the southern provinces, and offered support to any candidate who pledged himself to defend the Union. The recent dramatic increase in the franchise accounted for the unexpected optimism among ILPU activists in the run-up to the election. Nevertheless, an indication of the vulnerability felt by pro-Union supporters in the south was the delay in the public announcement of the formation of the ILPU until October 1885, one month before the general election. Indeed, though it was very active in the election, distributing large numbers of pamphlets, the existence of such a hostile political climate meant that much of its work had to be done discreetly. The ILPU supported 52 candidates in the general election, but there were no successes. In fact, the only two pro-Union victories in the south were the two unopposed candidates for Trinity College. While ILPU-backed candidates had won a respectable share of the vote in some Dublin constituencies, other results must have been acutely embarrassing for the fledgling organisation. For example, the anti-Home Rule candidate in Kerry East, Charles Henry de Grey Robertson, polled only 30 votes, which represented less than 1 per cent of the total votes cast in the constituency. The failure of the ILPU to make any electoral impact was disappointing, but its supporters were not disillusioned and their determination to thwart the Home Rule designs of their lower class political and religious opponents remained strong. Its predominantly landed leadership had been alarmed by the activities of the Land League in the early 1880s, and they feared that a Home Rule parliament, dominated by their enemies, would either force them out directly by confiscating their lands, or indirectly through penal taxation. WEH Lecky, the famous historian who held one of the two Dublin University seats from 1895 until his resignation in 1903, expressed this view most emphatically. Lecky recoiled from the notion of Catholic democratic rule, stating that this fellow Irish Unionists might just have accepted a Home Rule parliament dominated by the Catholic gentry, but they could not stomach the thought of a parliament in Dublin controlled by their former class enemies in the Land League, who were “supported by the votes of the peasantry … and subsidised from America by avowed enemies of the British empire”. Meanwhile, in the ILPU’s first pamphlet, the fear of higher taxes was cited as the most important reason for rejecting Home Rule.
After their initial electoral foray the ILPU reassessed its strategy. While the 1885 general election had highlighted the futility of contesting seats in the south, the movement’s leaders appreciated that some form of constituency organisation should be developed in order to maintain morale among pro-Union supporters. Two other options remained open and both were tried. The ILPU had many contacts in British politics, and its members could use their influence on the mainland to encourage their parliamentary friends at Westminster to stand firm in the face of nationalist pressure for Home Rule. Another ploy was to develop close cooperation with their allies in Ulster, where there were obvious electoral possibilities. In the northern province, meanwhile, considerable consternation was caused by the announcement of Gladstone’s conversion to Home Rule following the general election. The election itself had a sobering effect on the Conservative party in Ulster. It won 16 seats to the 17 won by nationalists. The Liberals were left without any representation, but their participation had undoubtedly cost the Conservatives a number of seats. Gladstone’s sudden move and the normal post-election analysis of results had forced opponents of Home Rule to come to terms with their differences. Initially, opponents of Home Rule in Ulster had looked towards the ILPU to coordinate Unionist opposition across all four provinces, but some Ulster Protestants were soon expressing the view that there were special issues at stake in the north of Ireland. The lead was taken by a number of Conservative landowners who founded the Ulster Loyalist Anti-Repeal Union (ULARU) on 8 January 1886. From the outset the ULARU was active in staging a series of meetings across the province, and it moved quickly to establish close relations with both the Orange Order and the Protestant Churches.

The new movement received a boost from the highly publicised visit of Lord Randolph Churchill to Belfast in February 1886. The ULARU had undertaken much of the organisation for the visit, and Churchill delighted an Ulster Hall audience of Conservatives and Orangemen when he assured them that the Conservative party in Britain would back them in their hour of need. Churchill’s sentiments are important, as they marked a symbolic commitment by the Conservative leadership to their Irish cousins in the struggle against Home Rule. Yet in playing ‘the Orange card’ Churchill was clearly guilty of political opportunism, as his real aim was to exploit Gladstone’s conversion to Home Rule, and the consequent opposition in Ulster, to advance the Conservative cause in Britain.
Indeed, the announcement of Gladstone’s support for Home Rule in December 1885, and the subsequent formation of a Liberal government on 30 January 1886, made the introduction of a Home Rule Bill inevitable. It was with this prospect in view that a number of Ulster MPs with Orange connections had come together on 25 January to create a separate Irish Unionist party in Parliament. The inspiration for this move had come from Colonel Edward Saunderson, a County Cavan landlord and leading figure in the Church of Ireland who had represented the county as a Liberal MP from 1865 to 1874. The Land War, however, had altered Saunderson’s political views, and he joined the Orange Order in 1882 before being returned as the Conservative MP for North Armagh in 1885. In turning to the Orange institution Saunderson was seeking some form of defence against the growing threat of the Land League, and he was quickly joined by a number of other Protestant landlords who viewed the Order as a potential vehicle for landlord resistance to agrarian radicalism. Two Fermanagh landlords, EM Archdale and JH Crichton, later the fourth Earl of Erne, and their County Monaghan neighbour, Lord Rossmore, became very prominent in the early 1880s, and their action conferred a new respectability on a movement which had suffered from a chequered reputation in the past. Significantly, the attraction of the Orange Order made more impact in these south Ulster ‘border’ counties where the combined challenge of the Land League and Home rule party was most keenly felt by the landowning class. Consequently, this group of south Ulster gentry enjoyed a disproportionate influence on both the Orange Order and the emerging Unionist movement. Saunderson was the first leader of Irish unionism and he directed the party’s attack on the 1886 Home Rule Bill.

Yet Saunderson was a complex character. His Liberal party background saw him eager to promote a non-sectarian unionism, but his passionate commitment to the Orange Order and the recognition of the Order’s crucial organisational role for unionism ensured that his wish would never be realised. Ideologically, he believed in a form of Tory paternalism that was based on a landlord-led Protestant alliance. In spite of his obvious Conservative sympathies, Saunderson was convinced that Irish unionism should have its own distinct voice at Westminster. Only by developing this self-reliance and freedom of action, he argued, could the long-term security of loyal Irishmen be protected. In fact, Saunderson had been urging the formation of an independent party at Westminster since the previous