

Forms of nationalism



Constitutional Nationalism, which although prevailed over revolutionary and Cultural Nationalism throughout the period of 1800-1900, combined to spearhead a driving and determined nationalist force campaigning against the diverse British Governments of the period for Emancipation, Repeal of the Union, Home Rule amongst other concessions.

Constitutional Nationalism, embodied by O'Connell, was known for legislatively campaigning for concessions; Cultural Nationalism was an evolutionary process while Revolutionary Nationalism was essentially revolutionary known for its commitment to violence and its predominant legacies which were left behind by numerous martyrs of the cause. Daniel O'Connell, himself, was the protagonist of the emancipation story, who was followed by Charles Stuart Parnell in the late 1870s in the Home Rule and Land War sagas of the closing stages of the nineteenth century.

Constitutional Nationalism sought greater autonomy for Ireland within the British Empire through gradual, peaceful change. This was personified in O'Connell's clear dismissive attitude of violence in his Emancipation and Repeal movements, which ultimately contributed to his downfall in 1843 at Clontarf.

The second unquestioned leader of Irish politics in the nineteenth century, Parnell, was more open to an alliance with the revolutionaries, shown by the 'New Departure', his alliance with the Fenians. Key figures in the revolutionary movement included Robert Emmet in 1803, John Mitchel and Smith O'Brien, leaders of the Young Ireland movement. Abortive attempts in 1798 and 1803 failed to have much immediate effect, but these left a longer-term mark on Irish politics which led in part to the Young Ireland uprising of

1848 and the Fenian uprising of 1867. These two separate if sometimes overlapping ideologies provide the key to understanding the history of Irish Nationalism in the nineteenth century and furthermore in the last century also. A further strand of Irish nationalism, defined as Cultural Nationalism, saw the need to, as Douglas Hyde put it, “ de-anglicise” Ireland.

According to ME Collins, “ Ireland was developing an English culture that was indistinguishable from that in Britain” and therefore, in response to this, organisations were set up to promote an Irish culture at the end of the 1800s, where associations were founded such as the GAA that still exist today. Slightly different to the goals of Theobald Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, Daniel O’Connell sought after political autonomy within the Union of Great Britain and Ireland rather than full independence. His methods were always peaceful; moral persuasion through mass agitation. This was most significantly displayed in his mobilisation of the peasantry during the struggle for Emancipation, a thing which to such an extent was never again successfully repeated, constitutionally nor revolutionarily. At the passing of the Act of Union, the Protestant Ascendancy, 10% of the population maintained its power in an oligarchy which oppressed the rest of the population, which was predominantly Catholic.

The Catholic population were essentially a political tool waiting to be used and mobilised, at the start of the century. The first reaction to the passing of the Act of Union was Robert Emmet’s unsuccessful rising of 1803, where he was soon easily captured, tried and executed. Without Emmet, and namely his highly rhetorical epitaph proclaiming that no man should write his epitaph until Ireland “ takes her place among the nations of the earth”,

became a symbol and an inspiring memory, very dear to future revolutionary nationalists. In the years succeeding the fruitless uprising of Emmet, there was a political vacuum in Irish politics. However, this was gap soon filled by the pragmatic and enigmatic constitutionalist, named Daniel O’Connell. For the rest of the century and beyond, this was what Irish nationalism was to represent for the majority of the Irish population.

Republican separatism became only a small minority movement, and remained so until the final moment of its surprise success in the next century. O’Connell’s leadership of the Catholic Association from 1823 and the mass mobilisation it spawned through its policy of the Catholic Rent enabled him to lead a mass agitation for Catholic Emancipation, which was to be finally granted after his decision to contest the constituency of Clare against Vesey-Fitzgerald and the threat of violence between Catholics and Brunswickers. With the victory of Emancipation, many of his constituents pressured O’Connell to raise the motion of Repeal in the House of Commons in the mid-1830s but with the absence of support from the Irish middle class, the Catholic bishops, and most importantly, the loss of the now disenfranchised peasantry, O’Connell’s motion was utterly defeated.

Therefore, O’Connell entered into an alliance with the Whig government, known as the Lichfield House Compact in 1835, to campaign for more local grievances such as the Tithe Act 1838, the Poor Law 1838 and the Municipal Corporations Act 1840. This temporary suspension of the demand for Repeal brought with it success and failures. The Tithe Act helped to cease the tithe issue as a popular grievance yet still did not deal with the fact that the church of the minority was funded at public expense, and succeeded the

The War of 1831-36 which the revolutionary Nationalists, under the name of Ribbonism, were most active.

The Poor Law was basically just an extension of that of the English Poor Law, whereas Ireland's needs were different to that of its British counterpart. The weaknesses of the Poor Law, and its evident failure, was to be exposed no less than ten years later during the Great Famine. As John Mitchel put it, "The Almighty indeed sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine." The Famine, or An Gorta Mór, took more than one million lives, between those that died of starvation and those that left Ireland for a better life elsewhere. Those who were left behind in Ireland experienced a desperation that led to a massive change in politics and nationalism – in fact, only a few years later, the Young Ireland movement managed, characteristically of the revolutionary movements preceding it, an abortive uprising led by Smith O'Brien.

The Young Ireland movement was founded on the ideals of a romanticised Ireland and forged links with what was to be known as Cultural Nationalism. Charles Gavan Duffy, one of the founders of The Nation was himself a well known Irish poet. However, in a year of revolutions throughout the continent, such as in Italy, Germany, Austria and France, The Battle of Widow McCormack's Cabbage Patch is Ireland's sole contribution to the Year of Revolutions, where Smith O'Brien's uprising ended in nothing more than a skirmish with local police in a cabbage patch. In the aftermath of the severity of the Famine, the "Repeal Rent" dried up, and O'Connell died in May 1847. His death marked the end of a period in Irish politics.

The Famine, which has been referred to as “ passive genocide” due to England’s ineffectualness in dealing with it, had a profound influence on later political developments. It left a feeling of resentment against the whole system of government in Ireland and created a legacy distinctly similar to that of some of the martyrs of Revolutionary Nationalism, as it left, ingrained in the mind, a resentment of the British occupation of Ireland. Importantly, two of the Young Ireland members involved, James Stephens and John O’Mahony escaped punishment and both fled to Paris. O’Mahony went to America in 1853 to try to gain support for another uprising from those who had left Ireland during the Famine and Stephens returned to Ireland in 1856 to found the Irish Republican Brotherhood, with the sole aim of independence on its agenda. O’Mahony, in America, founded the Fenian Brotherhood, and the movement gradually began to gain support, yet it never had the support of the clergy. The attempted uprising in 1867 was a failure, yet the Clerkenwell bombing of 1867 contributed to substantial anti-Irish feeling in England, and prompted Gladstone to seek to “ pacify Ireland” which contributed to the passing of the Gladstone’s Land Bill 1870 and the Act disestablishing the Protestant Church over the whole of Ireland became law in 1869.

In September 1870 the Home Government Association was founded, later to be replaced by the Home Rule League with the back of the Catholic clergy and with this opportunity, Constitutional Nationalism emerged under the leadership of Isaac Butt and the Home Rule League, while Revolutionary Nationalism faded temporarily into the background. In practice, Butt proved himself to be an indifferent and ineffectual leader. He lacked concentrated

energy and the single-mindedness of purpose necessary to mould his party into an effective force in parliament. A few of his party members rebelled and advocated a policy of obstructionism, designed to halt the process of normal procedures in Westminster to draw attention to the Irish question.

This drew attention, and brought to the fore, an MP not in the traditional mould, but later described as “ an Englishman of the strongest type moulded for an Irish purpose”, named Charles Stuart Parnell. He succeeded Butt in leadership of the party and was able to draw Fenian support to his movement, which became a combination of constitutional and revolutionary means to achieve a single aim, which was dubbed the ‘ New Departure’. Parnell brought into concern the land question in Ireland, and the native peasant’s individual right to his own land. With Gladstone’s Land Bill 1870, a landlord who wanted to evict a tenant for a reason other than non-payment of rents had to pay compensation to the tenant for improvements made to the holding.

However, as the summer of 1877 had been disastrously wet, impacting on the tenant farmer’s produce, the landlords could simply raise rents to a height where tenants were unable to pay in order to avoid paying compensation. It was in 1877 that Parnell secured the backing of the Fenians in an alliance which saw Constitutional Nationalism straddle certain parts of Revolutionary Nationalism. Parnell now had his opportunity to harness the vast political forces into a political movement, as in revolutionary aspects, intimidation and agrarian violence had already begun to manifest themselves, and in October 1879, the National Land League was founded with Parnell as its president to bring about a reduction in rents, protect those

threatened with eviction, and obtain such reform as will enable every tenant to become the owner of his holding. The power of the Land League spread throughout the country. Many evictions were physically prevented and the Irish question was elevated to Parliament's chief preoccupation for the first time since the Union. Early in 1881, Gladstone accepted that the power of the landlord had to be more restrained than had been done by the Land Act of 1870.

The Bill that he introduced in April 1881 virtually conceded fair rent, fixity of tenure and freedom for the tenant to sell his holding at best market price. The success of the Act in most of Ireland depended on the Land League's reaction to it. Parnell did not denounce it completely, but complained that it did not do enough. The Chief Secretary believed that Parnell was trying to wreck the Act and arrested him in October 1881 under terms of the Coercion Bill of 1880. This only served to elevate Parnell's prestige but the increase in violence that followed was not only a threat to the government but also a threat to Parnell's leadership of the movement. Therefore in April 1882, the Kilmainham Treaty was signed as Parnell was released, coercion relaxed, and his demands on the land question were met.

Yet, in return, Parnell was to use his influence to calm the country and secure general acceptance of the Act. This treaty was met with denouncement by Parnell's allies. However, the agitation led, constitutionally I might add, by Butt and then Parnell won significant gains from the British Government and Gladstone in particular. In fact the disestablishment of the Anglican Church, which had been a source of discontent for the peasantry as far back as the Tithe War of 1831-36, had been resolved and The Nation

regarded it as “ the greatest victory ever won in the British Parliament. ” By this advanced stage of the nineteenth century, it looked concretely as if Constitutional Nationalism had been exclusively the most effective, even further cemented by the Phoenix Park Murders of 1882, where the Chief Secretary and the Under Secretary were murdered by a band known as ‘ The Invincibles’, who had no connection to Parnell. In fact, this came close to wrecking Parnell’s reputation as he retired at once into private life.

Yet, the incident was turned to his advantage as the obvious sincerity of his reaction made a good impression in Britain. By the end of 1882, Parnell’s position in Ireland was stronger than it had ever been before which led to Gladstone’s conversion to Home Rule and his first Home Rule Bill was only defeated by 343 to 313. Yet, for the next 20 years, the governments were dominated by the Conservatives. Cultural Nationalism was more specifically concerned with reminding Irishmen of their heritage and was closely linked to the Young Ireland movement especially. The GAA was merely preoccupied with the advancement of Gaelic sports and the Gaelic League was concerned with the preservation of the language itself.

Revolutionary Nationalism was for the most part ineffective as such examples as Emmet’s 1803 rising, the Young Ireland 1848 insurrection and the Fenian rising of 1867 serve to illustrate. It was only when Revolutionary Nationalism was combined with Constitutional did both reach the potential of achieving concessions from the British Government. O’Connell, to an extent, managed this with his military rhetoric and brinkmanship in the Emancipation struggle, but it was mastered by Parnell in the Land War, where his movement incorporated the Fenians of Ireland and America.

Constitutional Nationalism dominated this century in terms of ability to achieve concessions and it was only in a surprise uprising, in the next century, did Revolutionary Nationalism display its full potential.