

Relationship between ireland and great britain



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The years during 1815-1922 saw numerous significant events that would further Irish nationalism and culminate with the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation Bill resulted in Irish welfare becoming a key feature in British politics ever since. Yet, his subsequent failure to represent public opinion led to the split with Young Ireland. O'Connell's failure coupled with the perception of apathy displayed by the British during 'the Great Famine', led to the emergence of radicalised nationalism. Also, the increased emigration to the USA, as a consequence of the famine, resulted in a growing hostile attitude towards the British and led to the surfacing of new radical groups. Similarly, the initial failure of Parnell's Home Rule movement led to further radicalisation amongst nationalists. Nevertheless, the long-term significance of it cannot be denied: the passing of the third Home Rule bill in 1912 was arguably a result of Parnell's initial ability to convince the Liberals of the need for such a bill. The prospect of Home Rule, however, led to the emergence of the UVF. Indeed, the 'Curragh mutiny' that followed highlighted Asquith's wavering dedication to securing Home Rule to nationalists. Such realisations convinced the IRB of the need for the Rising of 1916. Certainly, the Easter Rising catalysed a series of events which saw the fall of the I. P. P. and the emergence of Sinn Fein. Moreover, the rising acted as an inspiration for Sinn Fein to follow and gave a degree of legitimacy to their goal. Thus, despite the great significance of the previous events, the Easter Rising can be regarded as a turning point as it replaced the moderate objective of achieving Home Rule with the more ambitious aim of Dominion Status. More importantly, it inspired Sinn Fein to exploit the increasing sympathy of the British public, which put pressure on the British government to create a treaty; previous events had failed to do this.

The Catholic Emancipation Act 1829 can be regarded as a decisive moment in the British and Irish question. It served as a devastating blow to the protestant Ascendancy, which had been present since the late seventeenth century; they had now lost their political and economic supremacy. Significantly, it changed the fabric of British politics: it led to the emergence of an Irish party in the House of Commons. For the first time, the Irish Question was disclosed to the British government. Irish welfare was now to become a key feature in British politics. Additionally, O'Connell's popularity was exemplified in the County Clare election of 1828. Certainly, the election demonstrated the power and the possibilities that could be achieved with mass opinion. Thus, O'Connell's initial pragmatic ability cannot be denied: Oliver MacDonagh writes that before 1843 O'Connell "blazed the trail Westminster"[1]. However, after this period O'Connell's record is one of resounding failure. There was an increasing divide between O'Connell's ideology and general public opinion. O'Connell's sustained notion of peaceful methods to achieve repeal sparked a growing perception of O'Connell's timidity amongst the population. As Quigley argues his emphasis on "moral force tactics... was too outdated for the Irish national movement"[2]. His split with Young Ireland, a group that now advocated the use of force, reinforces this notion. Nevertheless, O'Connell's actions were certainly significant in the course of the British and Irish question: because of his actions Irish welfare became a key issue at Westminster. Also, O'Connell's peaceful and constitutional methods were adopted by numerous individuals and remained prominent throughout a number of subsequent years. Ultimately, however, it cannot be seen as the turning point as the mass support for O'Connell was short lived; this was followed by the dormancy of the I. P. P. for many years.

Oliver MacDonagh concludes " In the end he failed ingloriously... two decades later his purposes and techniques had seemed almost to have vanished".[3]

The Great Famine undeniably altered the course of the relationship between Britain and Ireland. As a consequence of the famine, more radical approaches were employed. Young Ireland, who blamed the British government for the famine, organised the armed rebellion of 1848; the rebellion was, however, a spectacular failure. Yet, it is important to consider the wider context- the famine led to a period of political apathy. As F. S. L. Lyons states the rebellion was " totally out of touch with the world of reality"[4]. The rebellion was significant, therefore, only in the long term: it was a possible inspiration to future successors for the republic to be fought and died for. There was an element of martyrdom, which became increasingly prominent in subsequent years. Of course, it is arguable that this element of martyrdom may have inspired the ' blood sacrifice', which was evident in the 1916 rising. Yet this is a somewhat romanticised view, it is perhaps more likely that the rebels realised that the constitutional methods of Gladstone and Parnell were not working and that nationalism was dying. In this way, it is similar to O'Connell's demise: there was a simple realisation that constitutional methods were not effective enough in persuading the British Government to enact change; mass opinion was equally crucial.

The Great Famine also led to mass emigration with approximately two million immigrating to the USA. This was inevitably sparked by the widespread notion of abandonment towards the British government. Some historians go as far as to conclude that the British government's actions

constituted genocide: J. P. Sweeney argues that the government manipulated fate “ by pushing people to the brink of extinction and turning away so not to hear the wailing”[5]. The anti-British sentiment spread to the USA and this thus saw the emergence of the Fenians. Indeed, Fenian outrages in 1867, for instance, the incident in Manchester whereby the rebels became known as the ‘ Manchester Martyrs’, arguably sparked Gladstone’s mission to pacify Ireland. Moreover, the American connection marked an important step in the growth of Irish-American political and financial support for Irish nationalist movements.

Despite the growth of nationalist radicalisation, such groups remained to draw widespread support amongst the Irish population. Parnell’s Home Rule movement and its subsequent constitutional gains set a precedent for change. His commitment to pursuing constitutional methods was in direct contrast to the illicit methods of the Irish Nationalist Brotherhood, and this enabled Parnell to reach an agreement with the Irish Government. Certainly, Parnell was very effective in distancing himself from the violence that was employed by such groups: the shock Parnell displayed after the Phoenix Murders enabled Parnell to make huge constitutional gains as the government did not regard him as a threat- he made the concept of Home Rule a realistic objective; thus far no one had come close.

The eventual failure of Home Rule, however, led to militant radical groups to surface. Nevertheless, Parnell had a profound impact on Anglo-Irish history. Parnell was, remarkably, able to convince a majority of the Irish population that Home Rule was a viable option. Undeniably, as Adelman states he “ turned the question of Home Rule from a vague ideal into practical

politics”[6]. Moreover, even after his death, the legacy of Parnell’s Home Rule movement shaped the policies of the Liberals. The introduction of the 1912 Home Rule Bill was, as Patricia Jalland states, arguably “ the logical consequence of a long-standing commitment”[7]. It was Parnell’s Home Rule initiative that initially convinced the Liberals of the need to adopt a policy of Home Rule, and thus the passing of the 1912 Bill can be directly attributed to Parnell’s earlier constitutional methods. Of course, this went in front of many years of wholly unsuccessful attempts by other Irish Nationalist events; as one historian highlights, a few years previously it was “ difficult to believe any home rule bill would have had a reasonable chance of becoming law in the present generation”[8].

The determination to secure Home Rule resulted in militant groups resurfacing. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) now directly opposed the equally militant Irish Volunteers. Unionist leaders organised a ‘ Solemn League and Covenant’, which attracted in excess of 250, 000 signatures and pledged to resist the policy of Home Rule by ‘ all necessary means’. Also, the ‘ Curragh Mutiny’ exposed the sympathy of army officers towards the unionists. Naturally, unionist preparations for an armed revolt triggered similar preparations by the nationalists. The significance of the mutiny lies in the UVF’s realisation of the British government’s lack of support from the army. In contrast, for the nationalists, the mutiny confirmed their suspicions of Asquith’s dithering commitment to Home Rule. Moreover, the lingering prospect of civil war led to a realisation that any future attempt of Home Rule would result in similar conflict. Thus, in a sense, the realisation that civil war may have occurred enabled the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 to work: it

ensured the consideration of the partition of Ulster- if this was not considered then the treaty may well have broken down. Whilst this was not a turning point in itself, it did make the possibility of a later settlement a real possibility.

The announcement of war in 1914 overshadowed the militancy of most nationalists and unionists. Yet the prospect of a distracted and stretched British government coupled with the recent formation of the Irish Volunteers, convinced the IRB to capitalise on the situation: on Easter Monday 1916, rebels stormed the GPO. The severely harsh punishments the British government subsequently employed sparked a widespread anti-British sentiment amongst the Irish population. It was at this point that the Easter Rising became a turning point. Indeed, within eighteen months, the demise of the I. P. P. was apparent and Sinn Fein came to occupy the place as the prevailing Irish nationalist party. Thus, the Easter Rising can be seen as a turning point as it initiated a stark reversal in public opinion. It is possible to argue that without the rising the fate of Irish politics would have been determined by the rather moderate objectives of Redmond's I. P. P. In essence, if the 1916 Easter Rising had not occurred Ireland might well have settled for Home Rule as opposed to the more advanced option of Dominion status, which was later secured. As F. S. L. Lyons reaffirms, " the whole constitutional movement, in the last analysis, was the chief casualty of 1916".[9]

The tactics used by the rebels of 1916 also acted as an inspiration to Sinn Fein and the newly found IRA. The Rising led to an era of pursuing direct political or physical action. Certainly, their decision to boycott the ‘

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Government of Ireland Act 1920' was indicative of Sinn Fein's utter contempt towards British rule over Ireland. Additionally, their persistence of new terrorist tactics in the Anglo-Irish War led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. However, it is important to note that ever since Parnell's Home Rule Policy there was an increasing element of British sympathy present towards the Irish population. O'Brien confirms this notion: " Ever since... the genius of Parnell compelled Gladstone to propagate the Irish question in England, the English have assumed an attitude of pity and commiseration towards Ireland"[10]. This was crucial- many historians have argued that it was the pressure from the British public that prompted the prospect of a treaty; as D. G. Boyce writes, " it was the revolt of the British conscience, not the defeat of the British army, that obliged Lloyd George to seek terms of peace and settlement with Sinn Fein"[11]. Nevertheless, previous events had simply failed to capitalise on this point. The Easter Rising can, therefore, be considered as the turning point as it inspired the IRA to use violence, which would spark a reaction of the British government. This in turn, sparked an outrage in Britain and thus put increased pressure on the British to secure a civilised settlement with Ireland. Of course, the initial reaction to the British Government's punishments in 1916 demonstrated to the IRA Britain's propensity to alienate masses of people.

In conclusion, the years 1815-1922 saw a multitude of events, which changed the relationship between Britain and Ireland. O'Connell saw that Irish welfare became a key element in British politics and his constitutional methods along with his ability to garner mass support remained a prominent method in subsequent years. Yet O'Connell's later failure coupled with the '

Great Famine' initiated an increasingly radical approach, resulting in Young Ireland's 1848 rebellion and Fenian outrages in 1867. Similarly, Parnell's initial failure to secure Home Rule led to the surfacing of militant groups. Yet, these events crucially failed to use constitutional methods based on mass support in conjunction with an element of radicalism. It was not until after the Easter Rising of 1916 where both of these methods were employed. The Rising initiated the demise of the I. P. P. and saw the emergence of Sinn Fein and the formation of the Dail Eireann. This was, of course, complemented by the creation of the IRA, which was part of the new philosophy of physical action, which stemmed from the rising. This led to Dominion status being granted to Ireland. Certainly, the notion that the rising led to the more advanced dominion status as opposed to the moderate objective of Home Rule further reiterates that the Easter Rising was the turning point in the long-standing British and Irish question; as McGarry writes the "Rising is the defining event of the modern Irish republican tradition"[12].

Word Count: 2355