

The North Began

Eoin MacNeill

From *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 1 November 1913, p. 6*

A wonderful state of things has come to pass in Ulster. Three distinct parties, each too weak to be of much force in politics, have ranged themselves against home rule. These are the Orange industrial workers, mainly Church of Ireland Protestants; the Presbyterian rural community; and the remnant of the feudal aristocracy. The first two elements have been drawn together by what is called the 'No-Popery' sentiment. This fact has been turned to account by the third element, and, when dual ownership, land purchase, and the abolition of grand jury government had apparently consigned feudalism to the incurable ward, a combination of landlords, land-agents, land-lawyers, and their adherents, in return for conferring the stamp of 'respectability' on the 'No-Popery' sentiment, has managed to secure the control of an alliance of wage-earners and rent-payers. That this is literally true may be verified by anyone who consults the newspaper files for (1) the names of those who took the initiative in the organization of the Ulster 'Unionist Clubs', and (2) the names of the numerous *personnel* of the Ulster 'Provisional Government'. To attain such an ascendancy seems almost a miracle of political adroitness, but there is another side of the picture.

The Parliament Act deprived Irish feudalism of what hitherto had been its chief resource, the effective support of British feudalism in the legislature. Then the masters of the Ulster triple alliance decided on an extraordinary step, the enrolment of a Volunteer force manned by their 'allies', the 'Unionist' wage-earners and rent-payers. Of the three 'allied' forces, one only, the managing element, is really 'Unionist'. Inter-marriage, social inter-course, and self-interest unite the decaying feudal aristocracy of Ireland to the still opulent feudal aristocracy of Great Britain; but history shows and observation confirms that the Orange democracy and the Presbyterian rural party are home rulers in principle and in essence. The loyalty of Orangemen to the 'Crown', the 'Constitution', the 'Empire', and the 'Union' arise[s] out of the notion that these entities secure them in possession of home rule and a little more. But whenever any abatement of that little more seems likely to come from constitutional developments, loyalty and affection instantaneously put on a different face. The Presbyterian country party, as history shows, though slower to move and understand, is not less radically attached to home rule than the Orange party.

The skill of the feudal element in obtaining the lead is more than counterbalanced by their fatuity in starting among the essential home rulers of their present following the most decisive move towards Irish autonomy that has been made since O'Connell invented constitutional agitation. The Ulster Volunteer movement is essentially and obviously a home rule movement. It claims no doubt, to hold Ireland 'for the Empire'; but really it is no matter whether Ireland is to be held for the empire or for the empyrean,

* For MacNeill's express purpose in publishing this article and for its effect in leading to the foundation of the Irish Volunteers, see F. X. Martin, 'MacNeill and the foundation of the Irish Volunteers', above, pp. 129-35. The article has been re-published in *The Irish Volunteers, 1913-1915*, ed. F. X. Martin (Dublin 1963), pp. 57-61.

against the pope, against John Redmond, or against the man in the moon. What matters is *by whom Ireland is to be held*. Lord Lansdowne, speaking recently against home rule, spoke fine old medieval words, 'We have Ireland and we mean to keep her.' The Ulster Volunteers reply, 'We are going to hold Ireland – of course for your lordships.'

The true meaning of this extraordinary development is dawning painfully on English Unionists. They are beginning to understand that Sir Edward Carson has knocked the bottom out of Unionism. To add to their comfort, a Mr Arnold White has been proving in elaborate detail that the present available resources of the British army are not sufficient to put down the Volunteer movement in four of the thirty-two Irish counties. In any case, it appears that the British army cannot now be used to prevent the enrolment, drilling, and reviewing of Volunteers in Ireland. There is nothing to prevent the other twenty-eight counties from calling into existence citizen forces to hold Ireland 'for the Empire'. It was precisely with this object that the Volunteers of 1782 were enrolled, and they became the instrument of establishing self-government and Irish prosperity. Their disbanding led to the destruction alike of self-government and of prosperity, and the opportunity of rectifying a capital error of this sort does not always come back again to nations.

The more responsible section of English Unionist opinion has taken alarm and is tentatively drawing away from the two-edged sword of 'Ulster'. But even the rashest English Unionists are clearly in great uneasiness; and while they threaten with Ulster, they are openly beseeching the other side to find them a way out of their mess. Dick Steele's creditors once sent him a deputation, as they said, 'to discuss his difficulties with him'. 'Pardon me, gentlemen,' was his remark, 'your difficulties, not mine.' Sir Edward Carson proclaimed that, in launching his new Ulster policy, he had not counted the cost. It looks like it.

The moral of the story is that, in public movements, every element of sham and insincerity is a mortgage given to destiny. I do not say that Sir Edward Carson is insincere. Probably he, too, like the Orangemen and Presbyterians, is at heart a home ruler, and thinks that the sort of home rule that he wants is best guaranteed by the semblance of government from outside. His English allies, however, hoped that his master-move would do effective electioneering work for them, and the fact that since he 'drew the sword' in Ulster he has devoted most of his energies to a political tour in Great Britain shows that he has lent himself to the game. That does not pay. In Ulster, too, the local managers, the feudal remnant, who have good reason not to be in earnest when they make a military array of wage-earners and rent-payers, thus mounting and loading a machine gun whose mechanism they cannot hope to control, have shown their hand and have been found evidently bluffing. Their 'Provisional Government', with its pompous detail of phantom departments, put on paper in secret session at a Belfast club, is the most ridiculous piece of political histrionics ever staged. A parcel of schoolboys would be ashamed to own it. In order to pretend strength they arranged to hold reviews in such overwhelming nationalist districts as Omagh, Raphoe, Armagh, Newry and Kilkeel, but perhaps the crowning sham was the announcement of an insurance fund of £1,000,000. The real insurance fund for real

war is fighting material, men, arms, ammunition, transport, ships, fortifications; and those who are in earnest about war will not devote a penny to any other sort of insurance. All this shows that feudalism in Ireland is doating as well as decaying, and the cheap cuteness that can play successfully upon religious fanaticism is no proof of any higher form of intelligence. English Unionists realize, explicitly or instinctively, that the Ulster Volunteers have scuttled the ship; some of them, sooner than admit their discomfiture, are hankering after the separation from Ireland *of what they are pleased to call 'homogeneous Ulster', namely, the four eastern counties.* Not a single responsible man and no assembly of men in Ireland has authorized this proposal. All nationalist opinion and any Unionist opinion that has been expressed is strongly hostile to it. And foe a very good reason.

There is no 'homogeneous Ulster'. It is impossible to separate from Ireland the city that Saint Patrick founded, the city that Saint Columba founded, or the tombs of Patrick, Brigid and Columba. They would defy and nullify the attempt. It is impossible to separate from Ireland the 'frontier town' of Newry, the men of south Down, Norman and Gael, the Gaelic stock of the Fews that hold 'the Gap of the North', the glensmen of south Derry, or north Antrim. If there were any possibility of civil war, if civil war were assured, not to speak of its being insured, these districts alone would hold immovable all the resources of General—I believe—Richardson. There are besides the 100,000 nationalist home rulers of Belfast, and others, Protestants, Catholic, Orange and Presbyterian, in every corner of the four counties, who under any change of government are certain to 'revert to type'. With what facility they have fallen in with the idea of holding Ireland—for the empire!

It is evident that the only solution now possible is for the empire either to make terms with Ireland or to let Ireland go her own way. In any case, it is manifest that all Irish people, Unionist as well as nationalist, are determined to have their own way in Ireland. On that point, and it is the main point, Ireland is united. It is not to follow, and it will not follow, that any part of Ireland, majority or minority, is to interfere with the liberty of any other part. Sir Edward Carson may yet, at the head of his Volunteers, 'march to Cork'. If so, their progress will probably be accompanied by the greetings of ten times their number of National Volunteers, and Cork will give them a hospitable and a memorable reception. Some years ago, speaking at the Toome Feis, in the heart of 'homogeneous Ulster', I said that the day would come when men of every creed and party would join in celebrating the defence of Derry and the battle of Benburb. That day is nearer than I then expected.