

This page has been archived and is no longer updated.

[Find out more about page archiving.](#)

Irish Home Rule: An imagined future

By Dr James McConnel

Last updated 2011-02-17



The Home Rule movement emerged in Ireland as a backlash against the the 1801 Act of Union with Britain. How was the future envisaged by opponents and supporters of self-government within the British empire?

Self-government

The casual observer could be forgiven for thinking that the picture entitled 'King George and Queen Mary Opening the New Irish Parliament' was a faithful representation of actual events.

But, in fact, the occasion never happened. The image was instead one of a number of propaganda postcards produced in the years before World War One in which various artists tried to imagine what Ireland would be like under Home Rule.

Yet even though Home Rule was never achieved, this image is much more than just a historical curiosity.

Pictures like this help us to make the imaginative leap back to a time in Ireland's history when the establishment of a Home Rule parliament in Dublin was to the majority of Irish people a real and immediate prospect.

As one English journalist visiting Ireland in 1893 (the year of the second Home Rule Bill) recorded: 'self-government was the only topic of conversation in hotels, railway carriages, tramcars, and on the steps of the temples, at the corners of the streets, in the music halls.'

Origins of the movement

Between 1801 and 1922 Ireland formed a constituent part of the United Kingdom.

At various intervals during this time, attempts were made to destabilise Anglo-Irish relations.

Rebellions were launched in 1803, 1848, 1867, and 1916 to try and end British rule over Ireland.

Daniel O'Connell in the 1830-1840s campaigned to repeal the Act of Union. But from the 1870s onwards Irish Nationalists (under Isaac Butt) favoured Home Rule.



Charles Stewart Parnell ©

It was not until 1886, however, that the first attempt to legislate Home Rule was made.

Nineteen years were to pass before another Home Rule Bill was introduced.

The Liberal government, led by WE Gladstone and supported by the Irish Parliamentary Party under Charles Stewart Parnell, introduced a Home Rule bill in the House of Commons. British and Irish Unionists (so-called because they defended the union of 1801) defeated it.

By the time another bill was introduced in 1893, Parnell was dead (having earlier been deposed following a messy divorce scandal) and his followers were acrimoniously divided.

Gladstone's second attempt was passed by the House of Commons, but was rejected by the House of Lords.

Nineteen years were to pass before another Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1912.

The Home Rule Bill

This bill proposed the creation of a bi-cameral legislative assembly subordinate to the imperial parliament in London.

It had carefully circumscribed powers over domestic issues and numerous constitutional safeguards to protect Protestants.

But while the debate at Westminster focused on Home Rule finance and the protection of minorities, the discussion on the streets of Dublin, Belfast, Cork and elsewhere reflected more personal hopes, fears, and aspirations for the future.

Nationalist politicians described Home Rule as the 'promised land'. The cause of Irish self-government was certainly interwoven with centuries-old memories of Catholic dispossession and Protestant ascendancy on the one hand and popish plots and moonlit intimidation on the other.

Sectarian riots raged after a Catholic allegedly told a Protestant that none of "his sort" would find a job under Home Rule.

Accordingly, expectations that a Dublin parliament would right old wrongs or settle old scores flourished.

In 1886, for instance, sectarian riots in Belfast raged for several months after a Catholic docker allegedly told a Protestant worker that none of 'his sort' would find employment under Home Rule.

Similarly, an English visitor to Ireland in 1893 encountered wildly optimistic expectations among Catholics and Nationalists: 'Every man ... [possessed] a visionary scheme of which he had all the absurd particulars.'

Accordingly, advocates of Home Rule were aware of the need to manage popular expectations, as one argued in 1914: 'In an autonomous Ireland public life would not be all nougat, velvet, and soft music. There will be ... vehement conflicts, for that is the way of the twentieth century.'

Imagining the future



King George and Queen Mary Opening the New Irish Parliament ©

The image showing the state opening of the new Dublin parliament anticipated the survival of the existing Nationalist and Unionist parties under their respective leaders, John Redmond and Sir Edward Carson.

But in an effort to reassure nervous English voters, Home Rulers sometimes predicted that with the passage of self-government, Irish politics would adopt a more British complexion, with a Liberal, Conservative and Labour party, all divided on prosaic and humdrum issues like tariff reform.

Some of those who supported complete separation from Britain also hoped that Home Rule would alter the geography of Irish politics, though in a different way.

While Arthur Griffith, the leader of Sinn Féin, initially denounced the 1912 Bill as a 'grotesque abortion' of the national demand, he quickly rallied and called on separatists to make preparations for becoming the principal party of opposition in the Irish parliament.

John Redmond envisioned a rural and traditional society in which peasant virtues were safeguarded against urban and modern worldliness.

But many proved less optimistic. One advanced nationalist, who later fought during the 1916 Easter Rising, recalled: 'It did really look as though some Bill would actually become law. Those of us who thought Home Rule utterly inadequate were a very small minority.'

His despondency was shared by another future Easter Rising rebel, Terence McSwiney, whose 1914 play, *The Revolutionist*, depicted the plight of advanced nationalists under a hostile Home Rule administration.

John Redmond was leader of the Home Rule Party (otherwise called the Irish Parliamentary Party) between 1900 and 1918 and after 1912 was seen by many as Ireland's prime minister in waiting.

He rarely spoke publicly of Ireland's future under Home Rule, but his occasional comments suggest he envisioned a rural and traditional society in which peasant virtues were safeguarded against urban and modern worldliness.

Ironically, this vision was not dissimilar to that of the senior surviving 1916 rebel, Eamon de Valera, when he was *taoiseach* (prime minister) of Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s.

Social conservatism

In fact, predictions about the likely social conservatism of a future Home Rule government surfaced as early as 1905 when the veteran nationalist Michael Davitt published a fictional account charting the first steps of the Irish National Assembly of 1910.

In it he depicted John Redmond as the leader of a National Conservative government, which is defeated by the National Democratic Party with the support of the Independent Labour Party over its policy to allow the Catholic church to control Irish education.

A future Dublin parliament "would contain a strong party in favour of a censorship".

In fact, the imminent prospect of self-government did prompt Irish trade unionists (including the socialist and future Easter Rising rebel James Connolly) to actually organize a parliamentary Labour Party in 1912.

Connolly eventually discarded parliamentary methods, as did some advocates of female suffrage. The growing militancy of Irish suffragists in these years reflected the realisation by some that Westminster was much more likely to give women the vote than the prospective Irish parliament.

Meanwhile, some commentators warned (in light of the 1907 riots over the play *Playboy of the Western World*) that a future Dublin parliament 'would contain a strong party in favour of a censorship, not only of the theatre, but of

books ... of the most drastic kind.'

Optimistic predictions

According to recent research, the ultimate failure of Home Rule involved the 'loss' to Ireland of a generation of Catholic university graduates who eagerly looked forward to self-government and the role they would play as statesmen, civil servants, and intellectuals.

In fact, such optimism (leavened by self-interest) was evident in a wide range of spheres.

In August 1914, for example, the annual meeting of the Irish Association of Gas Managers was told that devolution was 'bound to come' and that the 'prospects of the gas industry under Home Rule' were extremely promising.

Others anticipated a cultural and architectural renaissance in Dublin, with Home Rule informing, for example, debates on the housing of Hugh Lane's art collection through to the suitability of the old parliament in College Green as a modern European legislature.

Nor were these debates exclusively metropolitan. Contemporaries also looked forward to the rescinding of the so-called 'ban' on soldiers and policemen joining Ireland's most popular sporting organization, the Gaelic Athletic Association, with others anticipating that the GAA would become the organizing body for Ireland's national Olympic squad.

Nationalists were traditionally critical of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and some saw Ireland's 'bloated police service' as a prime target for belt-tightening by the new Home Rule Parliament.

Some constables feared that the new regime might exact revenge, while others welcomed the chance to protect and serve their own "kith and kin".

Unsurprisingly, according to one RIC sergeant: 'a good number of us look forward with a feeling of uneasiness and distrust to the day when they will be our masters'.

After all, the RIC had been the Irish face of the British administration in Ireland during the protracted struggle between tenant and landlord.

But while some constables feared that the new regime might exact revenge, other rank and file members (in a force which was predominantly Catholic) welcomed the chance to protect and serve their own 'kith and kin'.

A similar debate occurred within the Irish civil service. According to one observer, Irish officials in 1912 were: 'scanning copies of the Government of Ireland Bill to discover whether it contains any casual references to themselves'.

As with the RIC, Home Rulers predicted the slashing of red tape and the large-scale sacking of British (again mostly Irish) bureaucrats, though civil service anxieties were reassured somewhat by the belief that the mature knowledge of Irish officials would be essential for political Irishmen whose administrative training had been neglected.

Pessimistic fears



Donegall Place, Belfast, Under Home Rule ©

Ironically, it was the inveterate opponents of Home Rule, the Ulster Unionists, who not only dedicated the most time and effort to imagining what self-government would be like, but also depicted the future in the most rich and vivid terms.

Just as Nationalist images of Home Rule embodied their hopes for the future, the dystopian images depicting Belfast under an Irish parliament incorporated many of the fears expressed by Unionists during the three Home Rule episodes.

The postcard 'Donegall Place, Belfast, Under Home Rule', shows one of the landmarks of Ulster Unionism, Belfast City Hall, in a derelict and neglected state.

Pasture animals are included to show the backwardness of the new Irish government's economic policy.

Self-aggrandising statues of prominent nationalists have replaced those of Queen Victoria and the glorious dead of the Boer war, and the bustling city of commerce and industry has given way to pigs, cows and sheep (conventional Unionist symbols for lazy, southern Irish farming practices).

A similar scene is conveyed another picture 'Belfast Under Home Rule'. Here, another symbol of the royal connection with Ireland, the Prince Albert Clock Tower, is being demolished, while a replacement, in the form of a statue of John Redmond, is wheeled in.

Again, pasture animals are included to show the backwardness of the new Irish government's economic policy, while the human cost is conveyed by the overcrowded poorhouse and the crowds outside the Protestant Emigration Office.

Cultural battlegrounds

Another, more playful depiction of Home Rule, is the image on the front cover of Frank Frankfort Moore's 1893 novel, *The Diary of an Irish Cabinet Minister*.



The Home Rule cabinet (comprised of leading figures of the real Irish Parliamentary Party) is shown engaged in an unstatesmanlike fistfight. This was highlighting Unionist claims that passionate and emotional Catholics were

Front cover of 'The Diary of an Irish Cabinet Minister' ©

incapable of governing themselves.

In the top right-hand corner, the ghost of the deposed Protestant Nationalist leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, is shown looking on forlornly, while the top left-hand corner shows a Catholic bishop with a direct telephone line to the Irish cabinet – an allusion to Unionist predictions that Home Rule would mean 'Rome rule'.

The novel "The North Afire" imagined a violent civil war between Ulster Nationalists and Loyalists.

It was in the field of creative fiction that literary Unionists worked hardest to imagine Home Rule. From the 1870s through to the 1910s, novels of often dubious literary merit were produced in which dystopian visions of self-government were projected.

While the corruption, incompetence, and score-settling of Home Rule was savagely satirised in the fiction of Frank Frankfort Moore, popular Unionist fears and assumptions were also fictionalised according to familiar Victorian and Edwardian literary themes of romance, revenge and tragedy.

In one such example, *Under Home Rule*, published anonymously in 1893, the southern Anglo-Irish Fitzmaurice family resist eviction from Castle Fitzmaurice by the new police force, made up of their former tenantry, after refusing to pay exorbitant taxes to the new Irish parliament. Their position is only saved after Dublin is invaded by 10,000 Ulster Orangemen and the Home Rule Act is repealed.

By 1914, the epicenter of Unionism had moved northwards, and novels such as *The North Afire*, in which a violent civil war is fought between Ulster Nationalists and Loyalists, reflected this shift.

Home Rule reality

In the same week as the Government of Ireland Bill was introduced at Westminster in April 1912, the trade journal for Irish bakers, *Master Baker*, led with the editorial 'Decline in Hot Cross Buns'.

Only Unionists would find out if the reality of Home Rule measured up to their predictions.

Clearly not everyone was preoccupied with Home Rule. Nonetheless, many groups, organisations, and individuals were. Not only because of party and religious affiliations, but also because they interpreted it through their own experiences and expectations.

Of course, the Irish War of Independence (1916-1921) forced the great majority of Irish people to imagine their future in the light of very different circumstances.

It is therefore, ironic, that of all those who envisioned Home Rule before 1914, only Unionists were to have the opportunity. The 1920 Government of Ireland Act created Northern Ireland, which allowed them to find out if the reality of Home Rule measured up to their predictions.

Find out more

Books

Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism, 1912-1916 by Paul Bew (Oxford, 1994)

Home Rule: an Irish History, 1800-2000 by Alvin Jackson (Oxford, 2003)

The Fenian Ideal and Irish Nationalism, 1882-1916 by M.J. Kelly, (Woodbridge, 1996)

The Irish Parliamentary Party, 1890-1910 by F.S.L. Lyons (London, 1951)

The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life, 1891-1918 by Patrick Maume, (Dublin, 1999)

Irish Home Rule, 1867-1921 by Alan O'Day (Manchester, 1998)

The Ulster Crisis by A.T.Q. Stewart (London, 1967)

Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland, 1910-1916 by Michael Wheatley (Oxford, 2005)

About the author

Dr James McConnel is a lecturer in history at the University of Ulster.