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## Dissolving the ‘Sacred Union’? The Disestablishment of the Church in Ireland

### Abstract

In 1869, Parliament disestablished the Church of Ireland, dissolving what Benjamin Disraeli called the ‘sacred union’ of Church and State in Ireland. Disestablishment involved fundamental issues – the identity and purpose of the Established Church, the religious nature of the State, the morality of State appropriation of Church property for secular uses, and the union of Ireland and Britain – and debate was carried on at a high intellectual level. With disestablishment, the Church of Ireland lost much of its property, but it recovered, now as an independent Episcopal Church with a renewed mission. The idea of the United Kingdom as a semi-confessional Protestant State, however, was dealt a serious blow.

**Keywords:** United Church of England and Ireland; Act of Union; disestablishment; Church and State

In July 1869, after some eighteen months of intense public debate, the United Kingdom Parliament passed the act to disestablish and disendow the Protestant Church in Ireland. It was a highly contentious decision, seen as profoundly affecting not only Irish religious life, but the nature of the United Kingdom State. As the London *Contemporary Review* observed in September 1869, ‘wherever the English language was spoken, there was the Irish Church Bill discussed . . . It convulsed society and put each man at variance with his neighbour . . . It brought to the surface of society passions which it has been the policy of all modern governments as much as possible to keep under and suppress.’<sup>1</sup> According to Edinburgh’s *Blackwood’s Magazine* for February 1869, no question ‘can more profoundly affect the fortunes and the future of the nation’.<sup>2</sup>

For many in the mid-Victorian United Kingdom, the State had a divinely ordained foundation, expressed through the religious establishment. They viewed the Established

Churches as integral to the constitution, representing continuity with the past, giving a religious dimension to the State and elevating public life. The Established Churches were a recognition that a Christian State had a duty under God to provide religious instruction and observances for all inhabitants, and to pursue policies that reflected the divinely ordained moral law. The principle of established religion was expressed in the fifth clause of the Act of Union of 1800, which united the Established Churches of England and Ireland ‘forever’.

While the Established Church in Ireland was a minority Church, the Established Churches in most of the United Kingdom were large, influential, and increasingly confident institutions, which were carrying on an effective home mission, taking a leading role in overseas missions, and representing the sense that the United Kingdom and its vast Empire had a higher, providential purpose. Irish disestablishment, the Conservative party leader, Benjamin Disraeli, wrote in March 1868, opposed this vital principle of established religion not only in Ireland but throughout the United Kingdom; it threatened to sever ‘that sacred union between Church and State which has hitherto been the chief means of our civilisation and is the only security of our religious liberty’.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, in 1869, after a brief, but intense struggle, Parliament disestablished and disendowed the Irish Church.

This article will explore the public discourse surrounding Parliament’s decision to disestablish the Irish Church. The debates surrounding Irish disestablishment involved fundamentally conflicting conceptions not only of the Union between Britain and Ireland, but of the nature of the State and the role of religion in public life. The debates also involved property rights, including whether the State had the legal and moral authority to appropriate Church property and use it for secular purposes. The arguments were carried on at a high intellectual level in pamphlets, newspaper and journal articles, on the electoral hustings, and in both houses of Parliament. Irish disestablishment has been explored in valuable works by Edward Norman, P. M. H. Bell, Kevin Nowlan, and Kenneth Milne.<sup>4</sup> In considering the

debates over Irish disestablishment, this study will give particular attention to the relations of Church and State, and to the Anglican conceptions of the State – drawing upon the path-breaking work of Peter Nockles on the politics of High Churchmanship.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Idea of an Established Church**

The mid-nineteenth-century United Kingdom was a semi-confessional State. The State maintained Established Churches to provide religious observances, religious instruction, and pastoral care for the population and to represent a collective faith in God and divine providence – while at the same time extending freedom of worship and expression to other religious communities. There were two Church establishments: the Episcopalian and Anglican United Church of England and Ireland, and the much smaller Presbyterian and Calvinist Church of Scotland. Both Established Churches ministered to the inhabitants of their respective countries through a parish system. The idea of an Established Church represented for many the higher purpose of the State, elevating it above a mere collection of competing interests and seeking to ensure that it expressed a moral conscience at home and overseas.

The Established Churches in England and Scotland had experienced significant internal conflicts and external opposition during the 1830s and 1840s. Parliament imposed sweeping reforms on the Church of England between 1836 and 1840, and the Church was distracted by the theological controversies surrounding the Tractarian movement. The Established Church of Scotland was deeply divided over issues relating to patronage, and suffered the loss of about a third of its ministers at the great Disruption of 1843.<sup>6</sup> However, from about 1850, the English and Scottish establishments began recovering their influence and authority. The Church of England underwent a remarkable resurgence, associated with what Arthur Burns has termed a ‘diocesan revival’.<sup>7</sup> The convocations of the provinces of

Canterbury and York were restored in 1855 and 1861 respectively, giving clergy and laity a voice in Church governance, and over the next two decades, most dioceses also began holding regular diocesan conferences. There was significant growth in the numbers of churches and clergy. Between 1835 and 1875, the Church of England consecrated 3,765 new or rebuilt churches, increasing its total number by 25 per cent; between 1835 and 1876, the Church of England was consecrating on average one new or rebuilt church every four days.<sup>8</sup> The overall number of Anglican clergy in England and Wales grew from 14,613 in 1841 to 19,336 in 1861.<sup>9</sup> The Church of England was also the major provider of primary education. By 1858, it maintained nearly 20,000 day-schools, and was educating almost 80 per cent of the children of England and Wales.<sup>10</sup> Almost every diocese had a teacher training college and schools inspectorate. In 1841, the Church of England formed the Colonial Bishops Fund, to raise money to endow new bishoprics within the empire. There were at this time ten colonial bishoprics. Over the next fifty years, the Fund endowed seventy-two additional colonial bishoprics, laying the foundation for the world Anglican Communion.<sup>11</sup> In Scotland, the established Church of Scotland also made a remarkable recovery after the Disruption of 1843. Between 1849 and 1874, the Scottish establishment increased the number of its endowed parish churches by 20 per cent, and grew increasingly active in education and home and overseas mission.<sup>12</sup> It was recovering its position as the Church of the majority of the Scottish people.<sup>13</sup>

The Established Church in Ireland could not claim similar growth, but it was steadily improving its pastoral care. The mid-nineteenth-century Church of Ireland was governed by two archbishops, Armagh and Dublin, and ten bishops – with the archbishop of Armagh as primate. There were, according to the census conducted in Ireland in 1861, 693,357 adherents of the Church of Ireland, representing 11.9 per cent of the Irish population; this marked a slight increase from 1834, when the proportion had been 10.7 per cent. According to a royal

commission report issued in 1867, the Church of Ireland included 1,518 parish livings, 1,509 parish incumbents, and about 500 curates. Nearly 500 of these parishes were very small, with fewer than 100 Church of Ireland adherents, while ninety-one parishes had fewer than twenty Church adherents.<sup>14</sup> But pluralism and non-residence had been largely eliminated by the later 1830s, and the parish clergy now lived and worked among their parishioners, most in an exemplary manner. Parliament had abolished the Irish tithe in 1838, and the parish clergy were now supported by a tax on land (the tithe-rent), paid by the landowners. Although critics claimed it possessed vast wealth, the Church's revenues were in truth modest. The incomes of the Irish clergy were relatively low, with about 720 livings – almost half – valued at less than £200 per year, and 300 at less than £100 per year, although the low incomes were offset by substantial residence houses in most parishes, nearly 70 per cent of them built since 1800.<sup>15</sup> The Irish clergy were predominantly Low Church, or Evangelical; although, as Peter Nockles has shown, there was also a significant Irish High Church movement.<sup>16</sup>

The Irish Church was making the most of its resources amidst challenging circumstances. It had been forced to submit to reforms imposed by Parliament in the 1830s, including the suppression of ten bishoprics and a very significant reduction, over 25 per cent, in its income. Nonetheless, there had been growth in the number of its clergy, from about 1,200 in 1800 to about 2,200 in 1868, and in the number of churches from about 1,000 in 1800 to 1,579 in 1868.<sup>17</sup> Church of Ireland clergy bristled at the criticisms levelled at their minority status. They insisted that their claim to being a national Church lay not in their numbers, but in the truth of their doctrines, the purity of their liturgy, the pastoral commitments of their clergy, and the confidence of the State. The Church of Ireland maintained its parish structures, with its clergy offering public worship, sacraments, religious instruction, and pastoral care to those who wished them, but not imposing their ministry on Catholics or Presbyterians. Many established clergymen and their families had demonstrated

humanitarian commitment during the famine, working closely with Catholic priests on local relief committees, distributing relief to people of all denominations, visiting the sick and dying, and consoling the bereaved; some forty Church of Ireland clerics died of famine-related fever in 1847 alone.<sup>18</sup> However, the activities of the evangelical Irish Church Mission in the West of Ireland had led to greatly exaggerated allegations that the missions had used food to secure Catholic converts, and in the post-famine years these allegations overshadowed for Catholics the record of Protestant relief work.

### **The Call for Disestablishment**

The call for disestablishment emerged at a time of renewed social unrest in Ireland. In the early 1860s, there were a series of poor harvests, combined with outbreaks of disease that devastated livestock and brought mass destitution. Many in Ireland feared a return of famine conditions, but the United Kingdom Government refused any special relief measures. Irish distress and anger contributed to some popular support for the Fenian Brotherhood, a movement that had emerged in the late 1850s for achieving an independent Irish republic through physical force. In early 1864, the Fenians became increasingly prominent, recruiting by 1865 perhaps 50,000 oath-bound members, who marched and drilled, acquired some rifles, and cultivated relations with anti-British Irish expatriates overseas, and especially in America. There was an abortive Fenian rising in March 1867 in Ireland. While there was no real prospect of a successful rising, what R. V. Comerford described as the ‘fenian fever’ of 1865–67 made ‘a major impact on the public mind’ in Britain, as well as Ireland, and became a potent symbol of Irish discontent with the Union.<sup>19</sup>

In Ireland, Cardinal Paul Cullen, archbishop of Armagh and primate of the Irish Catholic Church, responded in part to the Fenian movement with the formation of a National Association of Ireland, aimed at pursuing constitutional means for the redress of the Irish

grievances. Since becoming primate early in 1850, Cullen had worked with considerable political acumen to reform the post-famine Irish Catholic Church and make Catholicism a major force in shaping Irish national identity.<sup>20</sup> The National Association, popularly known as ‘Cullen’s Association’, was inaugurated in December 1864 in Dublin. It embraced three main aims – land reform, State support for Catholic schools, and the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church in Ireland. In calling for disestablishment, the National Association entered into an alliance with the British Liberation Society – made up of Protestant Dissenters committed to ending the connection of Church and State, nationalising the endowments of the Established Churches, and placing all Churches on a voluntary basis. This alliance was surprising, given that most Protestant Dissenters were anti-Catholic, but at a pragmatic level, the alliance made sense, reflecting a shared hostility to the Irish establishment.<sup>21</sup> Cullen was certainly hostile, describing the established Irish Church in December 1864 ‘as a badge of national servitude, offensive and degrading alike to all Irishmen’.<sup>22</sup>

The former Peelite Conservative politician, William Ewart Gladstone, was now emerging as the leading figure in the emerging Liberal party. He underwent a fundamental change in his views on the Established Church in Ireland during the mid-1860s. A High Church Anglican with Tractarian sympathies, Gladstone had been a prominent defender of the Irish establishment in the 1830s. But he gradually became convinced that the established Church in Ireland was indefensible and must be ended, a change of view he described in a pamphlet, *A Chapter of Autobiography*, published in the autumn of 1868.<sup>23</sup> He continued to support the Established Church principle in Britain, but no longer in Ireland, where he believed the United Church of England and Ireland could never be national and that its very existence served to alienate most Irish people from the Union. ‘I started in life a believer in the Irish Church Establishment, and I spoke strongly for it more than thirty years ago’, he



informed the Quaker politician, John Bright, in December 1867. But now he believed it necessary 'to destroy the principle of State Establishment in Ireland' in order to bring justice to the country.<sup>24</sup> His conversion to the Irish disestablishment also had an element of political pragmatism. The Liberals had been outmanoeuvred by Disraeli and the Conservatives over the second Reform Act of 1867, which had significantly expanded the franchise, and Disraeli was now prime minister. Gladstone viewed justice for Ireland, and especially Irish disestablishment, as a cause around which the new Liberal party could rally. Whatever his political calculations, Gladstone's reputation as a devout High Churchman added credence to his view that the established Church in Ireland was indefensible.<sup>25</sup>

In December 1867, Gladstone became leader of the Liberal party, and in March 1868, he introduced three resolutions in the House of Commons for the disestablishment of the Irish Church. 'This is a day of excitement – almost of exultation', he wrote to a friend. 'We have made a step, nay a stride . . . on the pathway of justice, and of peace, and of national honour and renown.'<sup>26</sup> In opposing Gladstone's resolutions, Disraeli appealed to the Coleridge vision of an established Church as a national institution for the cultivation of the people. In language reminiscent of the Romanticism of his Young England period in the 1840s, Disraeli observed that 'Church property is the property of the people, set aside for a particular purpose – namely, their spiritual instruction'. He also appealed to the sacred union of Church and State that he maintained formed the foundation of the United Kingdom. 'Government is to be not merely an affair of force', he insisted, 'but is to recognize its responsibility to the Divine Power . . . If Government is not divine, it is nothing. It is a mere affair of the police-office, of the tax-gatherer, of the guard-room.'<sup>27</sup> Disraeli was willing to accept further reform of the Irish Established Church, even another reduction in its size, but not its abolition.

After considerable debate, Gladstone's three resolutions on Irish disestablishment were passed with substantial majorities by the end of May. While the resolutions did not

explicitly discuss the property of the Irish Church, it was clear that Gladstone's plan would strip it of nearly all its endowments. Significantly, the Irish Catholic bishops did not ask for the endowments of the Irish Protestant establishment; indeed, they insisted they would not accept the endowments if offered. They claimed to have no desire to enter into alliance with the United Kingdom State as Ireland's Established Church. The money, they said, should be used to benefit the Irish poor. After the passing of the resolutions, many Church of England clergy appeared to distance themselves from the Irish Church. 'Much wonder', observed the High Church *Christian Remembrancer* of July 1868, 'has been expressed at the seeming indifference of the English clergy' to the prospect of Irish disestablishment; it indicated that they did not want 'their own hard-earned progress in the cause of the Church to be imperilled by too cordial a sympathy with . . . the Irish Church'.<sup>28</sup>

His Government's defeat over Gladstone's Irish disestablishment resolutions forced Disraeli to call a general election. Held in the autumn of 1868, it was the first conducted with the enlarged electorate created by the second Reform Act. The Liberal party made Irish disestablishment their main electoral issue, and the Liberation Society (which had distributed over a million pamphlets on Irish disestablishment during the previous year) campaigned vigorously, with paid speakers giving over 500 lectures in support of disestablishment across the United Kingdom.<sup>29</sup> In November 1868, the Liberals were returned to government with a majority of 112 in the Commons. For Gladstone, the people had spoken, and the Irish Church would have to accept disestablishment. 'We are now', Richard Chenevix Trench, Protestant archbishop of Dublin, acknowledged on 21 November, 'to a great extent in the hands of our adversaries'.<sup>30</sup> Gladstone sought to meet with the Irish bishops to discuss with them the implementation of disestablishment and disendowment. But the Irish archbishops declined, claiming that they did not have the authority to make arrangements on behalf the whole Irish Church. In truth, Trench confided to Bishop Samuel Wilberforce of Oxford on 5 January

1869, Irish Church clergy and lay members would feel ‘slighted if not betrayed’, were the details of disestablishment and disendowment to be agreed between Gladstone and the Irish bishops. It would appear as though ‘we had helped him to sharpen the axe, adjust the block, and had pointed out the exact point in the neck of the Irish Church, where the head could with least trouble be separated from the body’.<sup>31</sup>

Instead, the two Irish archbishops asked Gladstone that the Irish Church Convocation, suspended since the early eighteenth century, be restored so that it could discuss the situation. (The Convocations of Canterbury and York, which had also been suspended in the early eighteenth century, had been restored in 1855 and 1861 respectively.) Bringing together the bishops and representatives of the clergy and laity, the Irish Convocation would speak for the Irish Church as a whole. Gladstone responded on 14 January 1869 that he would only advise the Crown to restore the Irish Convocation if it promised to restrict its discussions to facilitating his Government’s disestablishment plans, but not if it intended to negotiate its fate.<sup>32</sup> The archbishops, not surprisingly, declined his terms. ‘Archbishop Trench’, Gladstone informed Bishop Wilberforce of Oxford, on 21 January 1869, ‘seems to be a dreamer of dreams; and talks of negotiating at a time, when all negotiations will have gone by. I must look, and the Government must look, to justify our measure in the eyes of those by whom it is supported, and who . . . are *amply sufficient* to carry it.’<sup>33</sup> Gladstone proceeded to draft the disestablishment bill almost single-handedly, and introduced it in the Commons, in a masterly speech, on 1 March 1869.

To many, Gladstone seemed primarily concerned with rallying the Liberal party after its election victory. ‘The misery of this business’, wrote the Church of England clergyman and historian, Joseph Blakesley, to archbishop A. C. Tait in February 1869, ‘is that the claims of party allegiances interfere with the dictates of right & reason’.<sup>34</sup> The whole plan for Irish disestablishment and disendowment had come with great rapidity, and seemed grossly unfair.

In the 1830s, Parliament had imposed sweeping reforms on the Irish Church, abolishing nearly half its bishoprics, suppressing scores of parish livings, and depriving it of a quarter of its tithe income. The Irish Church had submitted to these reforms; it had made significant improvements in its organisation and clerical discipline; and it had carried on its work as an Established Church over the subsequent three decades. ‘We are the Established Church’, Trench had confidently proclaimed in 1865, ‘because we are the Church which the State believes to be true’.<sup>35</sup> Yet within a few years of Trench’s claim, the Church was being publicly vilified, denigrated as a ‘badge of conquest’, and treated in high political circles as a moral blight. ‘All at once, and almost without notice’, wrote a supporter of the Irish establishment in September 1868, ‘the enemy is at our gates, and the assault is begun.’<sup>36</sup> The Church was given no opportunity to meet as a body to coordinate a collective response to disestablishment. Rather, efforts for Irish Church defence found expression in protest meetings, parliamentary speeches, pamphlets, and newspaper and journal articles.

### **The Case for Irish Disestablishment**

In this public debate, advocates of Irish disestablishment emphasised the theme of society advancing towards greater religious freedom and equality. Their main argument was that the minority Anglican Church in Ireland had no claim to be the national Church of the Irish people. Nor would it ever become a national Church, because the very idea that, in the later nineteenth century, it should seek converts from the Catholic or Presbyterian communities was viewed as illiberal and unacceptable. There was no prospect of a State-supported mission to make the Irish Church truly national. This, in turn, meant that Irish Church’s endowments – which its critics claimed were the rightful possession of the Irish nation as a whole – were being used for the benefit of a small minority, and a minority that included some of the wealthiest, most privileged inhabitants of Ireland. ‘It cannot be right’, insisted Earl Russell in

the House of Lords on 18 June 1869, ‘that there should be an Established Church for one-eighth of the people of Ireland’. ‘After the experience of three centuries’, he added, ‘it is quite time to give up this experiment.’<sup>37</sup>

While Gladstone was personally committed to preserving the established Churches in Britain, many advocates of Irish disestablishment were religious voluntaries, embracing the separation of Church and State as a matter of principle. They applauded how Gladstone’s disestablishment plan, as it developed in late 1868 and early 1869, would make religion in Ireland voluntary – not only by appropriating the endowments of the Established Church in Ireland, but also by ending the State subsidies to Maynooth College for the training of Catholic priests, and by abolishing the *regium donum*, State subsidies to the Irish Presbyterian ministers. While some Liberals would have preferred a policy of ‘levelling up’ all the Irish Churches by providing increased State endowments for Irish Catholics and Presbyterians, Gladstone knew his British Nonconformist supporters would never approve increased endowments to the Catholic Church. His bill would achieve religious equality by ending all State-sanctioned Irish Church endowments. The money taken from the Irish Churches was not to go into the imperial coffers, but would rather go to projects to help the Irish poor, including asylums for the mentally ill and specialised schools for children who were deaf or blind, or had learning disabilities. Many supporters of disestablishment hoped religious voluntarism in Ireland would become a precedent for the rest of the United Kingdom. ‘I look upon it as an unreasonable doctrine’, insisted the Duke of Argyll in the Lords, ‘that every man should be called to pay for every other man’s religion’. The spirit of the age was moving inevitably towards ‘the principle of free and unendowed Churches’ and he was confident that disestablishment ‘will be looked back upon as one of the greatest triumphs of constitutional government.’<sup>38</sup>

Disestablishment, its supporters insisted, would also remove what was for Irish Catholics an historic grievance. In the past, the Irish Established Church had benefited from the anti-Catholic penal laws and the Protestant ascendancy. This meant that for Irish Catholics the Established Church was associated with subjugation and oppression; it was a badge of conquest and reminder of past wrongs. Many believed that the Protestant Church's property and endowments had been stolen from the Catholic Church by the English Crown at the Reformation. In introducing the disestablishment bill on 1 March 1869, Gladstone asserted that the Irish Church was 'the token and the symbol of ascendancy, and, so long as that Establishment lives, painful and bitter memories of ascendancy can never be effaced'.<sup>39</sup> There was no way that the minority Irish establishment would have lasted for three hundred years, insisted the leading Liberal, John Bright, on 19 March 1869 in the Commons, 'except by the power which founded it – namely, the power of conquest'.<sup>40</sup> By removing this symbol of past wrongs, disestablishment would be a major step towards ending social unrest in Ireland, diminishing Fenian support, and securing Catholic loyalty to the United Kingdom State. It would also lead to more equal relations between all the Churches in Ireland – Protestant, Presbyterian, and Catholic – ushering in a new era of religious peace and toleration. Supporters of Irish disestablishment emphasised how the people of the United Kingdom had spoken decisively in favour of Irish disestablishment at the general election in late 1868. As Gladstone said when introducing the bill, Parliament must now 'recognize the judgement which has been pronounced at the tribunal of the nation'.<sup>41</sup> The Liberal MP for County Galway, W. H. Gregory, insisted that the Church of Ireland must accept the 'inevitable' and stop 'gazing idly up into Heaven'.<sup>42</sup>

### **Arguments against Irish Disestablishment**

Many defenders of the Irish Church establishment, especially high Anglicans and evangelicals, emphasised the ‘sacred union’ of Church and State. For them, Irish disestablishment fundamentally threatened the divinely ordained political order in the United Kingdom. It would be nothing less than a sacrilege, an act of national apostasy, a collective rejection of the divine foundations of the State. Church defenders insisted it was the State’s duty under God to maintain an Established Church to provide religious instruction, observances, and pastoral care for its people. The United Church of England and Ireland was a single Established Church, the mother Church of the world Anglican Communion; the United Church was inseparable from the idea of the United Kingdom as a Christian State and of its Empire as serving a providential purpose. Disestablishing the Irish portion of the United Church would begin a process that would eventually abolish Established Churches throughout the United Kingdom. The Dissenters of the Liberation Society would not be satisfied with ending the Established Church in Ireland; Wales would be next, then Scotland, and finally England. ‘Let no one indulge in the illusion’, insisted *Blackwood’s Magazine*, ‘that disestablishment, as raised by Mr Gladstone, is a purely Irish affair’.<sup>43</sup> If an Established Church was admitted to be an unjust infringement on religious equality in Ireland, it was no less so in Britain.<sup>44</sup> The cause before them in Ireland, asserted A. C. Tait, the Broad Church archbishop of Canterbury, at a public meeting in May 1868 in London, was the principle of national religion, and ‘as soon as our State shall, in an evil day, repudiate that which was its strength – the national religion – it will be weighed in the balance and be found wanting, and glory will depart from it.’<sup>45</sup> The bill, insisted Robert Bickersteth, evangelical bishop of Ripon, in June 1869 in the House of Lords, ‘involves the assumption that it is no part of the duty of a Christian State to connect itself with the maintenance of Christian truth’.<sup>46</sup>

Disestablishment, its opponents further argued, would seriously weaken the Union of Britain and Ireland. The United Church of England and Ireland had been formed ‘forever’ by

the fifth clause of the Act of Union. It was a fundamental article of that Union: according to one commentator, it 'not merely united the two Churches into one, but makes their union an essential part of the Union between the two Kingdoms'.<sup>47</sup> To disestablish the United Church in Ireland, and leave Ireland without an Established Church, was to say that Ireland was no longer an integral part of the United Kingdom, but was rather a separate country, a colony perhaps.<sup>48</sup> 'You are endeavouring', insisted the Conservative MP, Gathorne Hardy, in the Commons in March 1869, 'to put Ireland on a different footing from England'.<sup>49</sup> Some opponents of disestablishment challenged the idea that the Church in Ireland could not be a national Church because it was the Church of a minority. An Established Church, they argued, existed to elevate the nation with religious truth, and religious truth was not determined by majorities; indeed, the true Church was often a minority Church in the world.<sup>50</sup> Others noted that while the United Church was a minority Church in Ireland, it was the majority Church in the United Kingdom as a whole.

For opponents, the Government's plans to disendow the Irish Church were a sacrilegious confiscation, a robbery of God. They rejected any idea that the endowments were the property of the State. That property', Gathorne Hardy told his fellow MPs, 'does not belong to you now, it never did'.<sup>51</sup> They also rejected the argument that the Crown had taken the endowments and property from the Catholic Church at the Reformation and given them to the Protestants; rather, they insisted, the ancient Irish Church of St Patrick had reformed itself at the Reformation. But even if Catholics believed that the Protestant Church should not have received endowments at the Reformation, was it justifiable for the State now to confiscate those endowments, which had been in the possession of the Protestant Church for over 300 years? Would not such a precedent also put at risk all the landed property owned by Protestants in Ireland?<sup>52</sup> 'You cannot', insisted the Liberal, Sir Roundell Palmer, in March 1869 in the Commons, 'take from those who have had a valid legal title for centuries that



which they have done nothing to forfeit'.<sup>53</sup> It was an act of sacrilege for the State to seize property from the Church and use it for secular purposes, even for such a worthy purpose as care for the poor. The Church of Ireland, moreover, needed its endowments, which were modest, in order to continue to provide a national ministry. Protestantism would not long survive in much of Ireland, especially in rural areas in the south and west of the country, without endowed parish churches. Many of those parishes had small, widely-scattered, and often poor Protestant populations, with Protestant landlords who were absentee; it was the duty of a Protestant State to ensure those people received pastoral care and religious instruction. Without endowments, rural Protestant churches in the south and west would gradually close, and their Protestant populations would either leave the area or be absorbed into the surrounding Catholic community. Protestantism would be forced, as a result of State action, to withdraw into larger towns and to the north of Ireland.<sup>54</sup> Some defenders of the Irish establishment argued that its endowments enabled the establishment to maintain a resident gentleman and his family in parishes across Ireland, who, even if they did not minister directly to all the residents of the parish, did distribute charity, visit the sick, spread cultivation, and provide examples of ethical behaviour. 'From every one of its parsonage-houses', insisted Bishop Wilberforce, 'in which a man of God and a holy family are living are daily diffused a thousand influences which are modifying the superstition around them, correcting its evil teaching, and tending to raise men to the true liberty of the Son of God'.<sup>55</sup>

The debates in Parliament, public meetings, and the press were carried on with great fervour and public opinion was divided. The Church of England was also divided on the issue. Most High Church Anglicans and Evangelicals opposed Irish disestablishment, believing the alliance of Church and State was vital to a Christian United Kingdom, though High Anglicans placed more emphasis on the 'sacred union' while Evangelicals gave more emphasis to the practical pastoral benefits of a parochial establishment. However, Anglo-

Catholics, including E. B. Pusey, H. P. Liddon and C. J. Vaughan, remained aloof, believing that the Irish Church might be elevated as a Church by ceasing to be established.<sup>56</sup> With the notable exception of Archbishop Tait, Broad Church Anglicans tended to support Gladstone on Irish disestablishment. The debates over the Irish Church involved questions of profound importance. Did the United Kingdom State have a sacred duty to provide religious instruction and pastoral care to its people, or were its responsibilities primarily secular in nature? Was there a sacred union between Church and State, or should the State be religiously neutral and all religious bodies be treated equally under the law? Was Ireland an integral part of the United Kingdom, as reflected by the United Church of England and Ireland enshrined in the Union, or was Ireland a separate country with a fundamentally different social, political, and religious order? ‘We are invited’, observed Spencer Walpole in the House of Commons, ‘for the first time in English history – and . . . I might say for the first time in the history of Christendom – to do away with the religion of the country as a national religion, and thus to make . . . a legislative revolution in our fundamental laws’.<sup>57</sup>

### **The End of the Irish Establishment**

With passions running high, Gladstone moved to get his bill quickly through Parliament. It was in no one’s interest, he stated in March 1869 when introducing the bill in the Commons, that ‘the Irish Establishment should be subjected to the pains of a lingering death.’<sup>58</sup> His bill passed through the House of Commons by the end of May. It was an extreme measure. The Irish Church would be permitted to retain its church buildings, and the property gifted to it by pious donors after 1660, but the other properties and endowments would be taken from it. The existing clergy, including permanent curates, would continue to receive their incomes, in the form of an annuity, for the rest of their lives, provided they did some work for the Church. But otherwise the Church would have to support itself through voluntary means, and

it would have to purchase back from the State the residence houses for its clergy. Landowners would continue to pay their tithe-rents, with the money now going to the State, though they were allowed to commute their tithe-rents into a lump sum payment and were offered generous loans to enable them to pay off the lump sum. Disestablishment and disendowment would go into effect on 1 January 1871, which meant the Irish Church would have little time to prepare for its new circumstances. Support for Maynooth College and the payment of the *regium donum* would also cease.

Supporters of the Irish establishment looked to the House of Lords to block the bill. Nearly all the Anglican bishops in the Lords opposed it, as did most lay peers, who saw the bill as a threat to property rights as well as to the Protestant constitution. On 8 June, a meeting of 150 peers pledged to oppose the bill at all costs. Open conflict between the Commons and the Lords, and a full constitutional crisis, now loomed. The Queen appealed to the recently appointed archbishop of Canterbury, the Oxford-educated Scot, A. C. Tait, to help find a compromise. Although he opposed Irish disestablishment, Tait helped convince the Lords not to resist the popular will, as expressed in the election of 1868, and instead to modify the bill in order to minimise the damage to the Irish Church.<sup>59</sup> Gladstone agreed to some of the Lords' modifications, which gave the Church a slightly improved financial settlement, and the Irish Church disestablishment act passed in late July 1869.<sup>60</sup> With that act, lamented E. H. Browne, the High Church bishop of Ely, 'a principle has been enunciated, never before accepted in Christendom, that a nation can with all the solemnity of law and equity throw off the Church and the faith handed down from its fathers'.<sup>61</sup> According to the historian Gabriel Daly, members of the Irish Church were forced to watch with 'helpless dismay' as their fate was sealed by 'one the smoothest operations ever carried through the British Parliament.'<sup>62</sup> As the act went into effect in January 1871, the mood within the

Church of Ireland was sombre. ‘Dimly dawns the New Year’, observed the Church of Ireland hymnwriter and poet, Cecil Frances Alexander, ‘on a churchless nation’.<sup>63</sup>

Yet there was also a new beginning for the Church of Ireland. The Catholic archbishop, Paul Cullen, was certain the Protestants would make ‘a sad mess’ of their new status.<sup>64</sup> This was not the case. Although badly shaken, the Church of Ireland proved remarkably successful over the following years in adapting to disestablishment and disendowment. During the course of late 1869 and 1870, guided by some gifted lawyers among its membership, the Church prepared a new constitution – including a Representative Church Body to oversee property and revenues, a general synod, and diocesan synods – which proved effective for the self-governing Church. Contrary to expectations, the large majority of existing clergy agreed to commute their State annuities into lump sum payments, which they deposited, at considerable personal risk, with the Church. Careful investments ensured that the resulting capital both paid the salaries of the existing clergy and generated a surplus to help support the work of the Church. The Church also successfully maintained its unity in doctrine and liturgy.<sup>65</sup>

The disestablishment and disendowment of the Irish Established Church was a momentous event, dissolving the ‘sacred union’ of Church and State in one of the three historic kingdoms forming the United Kingdom. Parliament had broken up the United Church of England and Ireland, which had been defined in the Act of Union of 1801 as a Church union made ‘forever’. In the early 1870s, Nonconformists began major popular campaigns for disestablishment in England, Wales, and Scotland, and the British Established Churches were thrown on the defensive. In Ireland, religion was now voluntary and the State now secular. With Irish disestablishment, Parliament confirmed that Ireland was different from the rest of the United Kingdom and should have its own constitutional arrangements. The treatment of the Irish Church, including the lack of consultation with the Church over its fate, had left

many Irish Protestants feeling abandoned. 'I object to this change altogether', stated the Irish Protestant, William Magee, now bishop of Peterborough, in the Lords in June 1869, 'but if it was to be made, there could have been a more statesmanlike and generous mode of making it'.<sup>66</sup>

While it represented a serious political effort to deal with Irish problems in their Irish context, disestablishment did not ease the social unrest in Ireland. The endowments of the Established Church proved much smaller than had been expected, and the modest sums made available by disestablishment became largely an 'emergency reservoir' that the State used to supplement spending on such matters as roads and fisheries. The Irish poor did not benefit much. Irish disaffection with the union continued, and within a year after Irish disestablishment was passed, the Irish Home Rule Association was formed in Dublin.<sup>67</sup> Irish disestablishment had no doubt been necessary given the circumstances in Ireland; for the overwhelming majority in Ireland, the minority Irish establishment was unacceptable, and a symbol of injustice and inequality. Because of the effective response by Irish Protestants to their new circumstances, disestablishment also benefited the Irish Church in the long run. Yet, while Irish disestablishment had been necessary, the underlying religious conceptions of the United Kingdom political order, including the idea of the semi-confessional State, were profoundly impacted by this severing of the 'sacred union' between Church and State in one of the three historic kingdoms making up the United Kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> William Maziere Brady, 'Prospects of the Disestablished Church in Ireland', *Contemporary Review*, 12 (September 1869), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> 'Mr Gladstone and Disestablishment', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (February 1869), 238.

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Disraeli to Lord Cairns, March 1868, in W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle (eds), *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, 2 vols (London, John Murray, 1929), vol. 1, p. 360.

<sup>4</sup> E. R. Norman, *The Catholic Church and Ireland in the Age of Rebellion, 1859–1873* (London, Longmans, 1965), pp. 282–385; P. M. H. Bell, *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (London, SPCK, 1969), pp. 1–225; Kevin B. Nowlan, ‘Disestablishment, 1800–1869’, in Michael Hurley (ed.), *Irish Anglicanism, 1869–1969* (Dublin, Allen Figgis, 1970), pp. 1–22; Kenneth Milne, ‘Disestablishment and the Lay Response’, in Raymond Gillespie and W. G. Neely (eds), *The Laity and the Church of Ireland, 1000–2000* (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2002), pp. 226–49.

<sup>5</sup> Peter B. Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship 1760–1857* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 44–103.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart J. Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland and Scotland 1801–46* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Burns, *The Diocesan Revival in the Church of England, c.1800–1870* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> K. D. M. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 405; Chris Brooks and Andrew Saint (eds), *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Haig, *The Victorian Clergy* (London, Croom Helm, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Parliamentary Papers*, ‘**Education Commission. Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State of Popular Education in England**’ (2794–I) (1861), vol. 1, pp. 592, 55.

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<sup>11</sup> Rowan Strong, *Anglicanism and the British Empire, c.1700–1850* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 198–221; W. F. France, *The Overseas Episcopate: Centenary History of the Colonial Bishops Fund 1841–1941* (London, Colonial Bishops Fund, 1941).

<sup>12</sup> William Smith, *Endowed Territorial Work* (Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1875), pp. 97–9.

<sup>13</sup> Stewart J. Brown, 'After the Disruption: The Recovery of the National Church of Scotland, 1843–1874', *Scottish Church History*, 48:2 (2019), 103–25.

<sup>14</sup> *Parliamentary Papers*, '**Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners on the Revenues and Condition of the Established Church (Ireland)**', (4082) (1867–68), pp. vi, x, xxx–xxxi.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii; Donald Harman Akenson, *The Church of Ireland: Ecclesiastical Reform and Revolution, 1800–1885* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1971), p. 220; *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* [hereafter *Hansard*], 3rd series, vol. 194 (23 March 1869), cols. 2015–16

<sup>16</sup> Peter Nockles, 'Church or Protestant Sect? The Church of Ireland, High Churchmanship, and the Oxford Movement', *Historical Journal*, 41:2 (1998), 457–93.

<sup>17</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 194 (23 March 1869), cols. 2015–16.

<sup>18</sup> Desmond Bowen, *Souperism: Myth or Reality* (Cork, Mercier Press, 1970), pp. 183–212.

<sup>19</sup> R. V. Comerford, 'Gladstone's First Irish Enterprise, 1864–70', in W. E. Vaughan (ed.), *A New History of Ireland, Volume 5: Ireland under the Union, I: 1801–70* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 434–9, quotation on 439; R. V. Comerford, *The Fenians in Context: Irish Politics and Society, 1848–1882* (Dublin, Wolfhound, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–75', *American Historical Review*, 77:3 (1972), 625–52; Emmet Larkin, *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1850–1860* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Emmet Larkin,

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*The Consolidation of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1860–1870* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Norman, *Catholic Church and Ireland*, pp. 135–89; Larkin, *Consolidation of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland*, pp. 341–93.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Norman, *Catholic Church and Ireland*, p. 147

<sup>23</sup> W. E. Gladstone, *A Chapter of Autobiography* (London, John Murray, 1868).

<sup>24</sup> W. E. Gladstone to J. Bright, 10 December 1867, in William Ewart Gladstone, *Correspondence on Church and Religion of William Ewart Gladstone*, 2 vols, ed. D. C. Lathbury (London, John Murray, 1910), vol. 1, p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> Nowlan, ‘Disestablishment, 1800–1869’, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 3 vols (London, Macmillan, 1905), vol. 1, pp. 880–1.

<sup>27</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 191 (3 April 1868), cols. 916, 918. For Disraeli, Young England and the Church, see Brown, *National Churches*, pp. 335–7.

<sup>28</sup> ‘The Irish Church’, *Christian Remembrancer*, 56 (July 1868), 113.

<sup>29</sup> J. P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party 1867–1875* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 276.

<sup>30</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, Wilberforce Papers, c.6/2, Richard Chenevix Trench to Samuel Wilberforce, 21 November 1868, fos 202–7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, c.6/2, Richard Chenevix Trench to Samuel Wilberforce, 5 January 1869, fos 227–32.

<sup>32</sup> William Ewart Gladstone to Richard Chenevix Trench, 14 January 1869, and Richard Chenevix Trench to M. G. Beresford, 15 January 1869, in Richard Chenevix Trench, *Richard Chenevix Trench, Archbishop, Letters and Memorials*, 2 vols, ed. M. Wilson (London, Kegan Paul, 1888), vol. 2, pp. 73–4; Akenson, *The Church of Ireland*, pp. 241–2.



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- <sup>33</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, Wilberforce Papers, d.37, William Ewart Gladstone to Samuel Wilberforce, 21 January 1869, fos 159–60.
- <sup>34</sup> Lambeth Palace Library, London, Tait Papers, Tait 87, J. W. Blakesley to A. C. Tait, 11 February 1869, fos 60–3.
- <sup>35</sup> Quoted in Gabriel Daly, ‘Church Renewal: 1869–1877’, in Hurley (ed.), *Irish Anglicanism*, p. 24.
- <sup>36</sup> George Anthony Denison, *The Churches of England and Ireland One Church by Identity of Divine Trust* (London, Rivingtons, 1868), p. 7.
- <sup>37</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 197 (18 June 1869), cols. 164, 166.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, (18 June 1869), cols. 210, 213.
- <sup>39</sup> W. E. Gladstone, *The Irish Church: A Speech delivered in the House of Commons on March 1, 1869* (London, John Murray, 1869), p. 5.
- <sup>40</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 194 (19 March 1869), col. 1881.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, (1 March 1869), col. 418.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, (18 March 1869). col. 1702
- <sup>43</sup> ‘Mr Gladstone and Disestablishment’, p. 238.
- <sup>44</sup> James Thomas O’Brien, *The Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Irish Branch of the United Church, Considered, Part I: Effects, Immediate and Remote* (London, Rivingtons, 1869), p. 45.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Great Church and State Meeting at St. James Hall . . . May 6th, 1868* (London, Church Institution, 1868), pp. 5, 6.
- <sup>46</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 197 (17 June 1869), col. 54.
- <sup>47</sup> O’Brien, *The Disestablishment and Disendowment*, p. 31
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- <sup>49</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 194 (23 March 1869), col. 2071.

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- <sup>50</sup> John Deacon Massingham, *The Church of Ireland Defended* (London, William MacIntosh, 1868), p. 14.
- <sup>51</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 194 (23 March 1869), col. 2080.
- <sup>52</sup> ‘The Case of the Established Church in Ireland’, *Quarterly Review* (April 1868), 553; O’Brien, *Disestablishment and Disendowment*, pp. 16–17.
- <sup>53</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 194 (22 March 1869), col. 1935.
- <sup>54</sup> O’Brien, *Disestablishment and Disendowment*, pp. 24–8.
- <sup>55</sup> *Great Church and State Meeting at St. James Hall*, pp. 9–10.
- <sup>56</sup> Owen Chadwick *The Victorian Church, Part Two, 1860-1901*, 2nd edn. (London, A. C. Black, 1972), pp. 429-30.
- <sup>57</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 194 (23 March 1869), col. 2004.
- <sup>58</sup> Gladstone, *The Irish Church*, p. 8.
- <sup>59</sup> Randall Thomas Davidson and William Benham, *Life of Archibald Campbell Tait*, 2 vols (London, Macmillan, 1891), vol. 2, pp. 1–43.
- <sup>60</sup> ‘The Irish Church Act, 1869, 32 & 33 Victoria Cap. 42’:  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1869/42/enacted>, accessed 9 April 2020.
- <sup>61</sup> Edward Harold Browne, *A Charge delivered to the Clergy and Churchwardens of the Diocese of Ely* (London, Longman, Green and Co., 1869), p. 33.
- <sup>62</sup> Daly, ‘Church Renewal: 1869–1877’, in Hurley (ed.), *Irish Anglicanism*, p. 23.
- <sup>63</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- <sup>64</sup> Larkin, *Consolidation of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland*, p. 639.
- <sup>65</sup> Daly, ‘Church Renewal: 1869–1877’, in Hurley (ed.), *Irish Anglicanism*, pp. 23–38; Bell, *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales*, pp. 158–212.
- <sup>66</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd series, vol. 196 (15 June 1869), col. 1874.

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<sup>67</sup> Bell, *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales*, pp. 214–19; Stewart J. Brown, *Providence and Empire: Religion, Politics and Society in the United Kingdom, 1815–1914* (Harlow, Longman/Pearson, 2008), pp. 256–8.