

Newspaper and Periodical History Society of Ireland¹

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"Notes from Ireland: Irish Unionism's media outreach to Britain - and beyond"

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The printed press in Ireland has always been, from its inception at least until the demise of the *Irish Press* two decades ago, and still today in Northern Ireland, closely involved in the political battles that have shaped, and continue to shape, modern Ireland, not only as an observer, but as an active participant.

In this context, the failure of the Irish uprisings of 1848 and 1867 had two significant effects. One was to push militaristic Irish nationalism underground, via the Irish Republican Brotherhood; the other was the growth of a aggressive constitutionalism under Parnell and the increasingly powerful Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster. Also relevant was the sea-change in the ownership and editorial direction of Irish regional newspapers: by 1880, about a third of the provincial newspapers had declared themselves nationalist, even though this exposed them to intermittent official disfavour and even overt censorship.

The election of 1885² “exploded utterly the absurd fiction that Unionist landlords, not Nationalist leaders, were the true interpreters of the will of the Irish people.”³ Subsequent events, and the reaction of successive British governments, were to write the final obituary of Isaac Butt’s plan for a self-governing Ireland within the United Kingdom.

In the period now marked by what we describe as the decade of commemoration, this was especially the case. But even before then, there were potent signs that the internationalization of the Irish conflict, and the role of the media in a number of different countries, were – at least as much as the details of that conflict itself - seen as a potent influence on the possible outcome of the struggle for Irish separation from Britain. Papers like Patrick Ford’s *Irish World* and John Boyle O’Reilly’s *Boston Pilot* in the United States kept the pot of Irish nationalism at a steady boil; in Britain, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Liberal press from time to time took England’s mistreatment of Ireland as a *leit-motif*, and the successive enlargements of the UK franchise to include many Irish emigrants was seen by Conservatives and Unionists as a potential threat to British political stability, or at

¹ The concept for this paper, and much of the basic research, was carried out in the Burns Library, Boston College, where I was privileged to be the Burns Scholar for the Fall Semester of 2014. My best thanks are due to the Center for Irish Studies at BC, the Burns Librarian, Christian Dupont, and his staff, and of course also to the Burns family.

² Polling day was actually on 12 January 1886 but the official chronology dates the election to the dissolution of parliament in 1885.

³ James Winder Good, *Irish Unionism*, Dublin, The Talbot Press, 1920, 178-9.

least predictability. As Gladstone put it, the electoral accent of Great Britain was tinged strongly with the Irish brogue.⁴

It is not surprising that many of those who were most alarmed by this threat were those who were closest to it: Irish Unionists. When Parnell founded the Irish National League in 1882, the focus of this movement rapidly developed from land reform to self-government or Home Rule; three years later, Parnell's party won 85 out of the 103 Irish seats at Westminster. The Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union, which had been founded the previous year and which changed its name to the Irish Unionist Alliance in 1891, launched *Notes from Ireland* in 1886, undoubtedly as a direct response to the outcome of the 1886 election, and only marginally in advance of the launch of the Plan of Campaign in October 1886.

As this publication survived until 1938 – the NLI, regrettably, does not have copies later than 1918, but a full microfilm is available in Boston College, in PRONI and at Queen's University Library – a full examination and content analysis is impossible in a paper such as this. In the circumstances, I propose to look in moderate detail into its origins and methodology, its attitude to the principal events of the decade of commemoration, and its relationship with Irish Unionism in the wider sense.

Notes from Ireland was not a newspaper in the classic sense, but its influence was arguably as great as, or perhaps even greater, than traditional British or Irish newspapers which supported the Union. It was produced by Irish Unionists, from their offices in 109 Grafton Street, but its target appeal was only marginally focused on Irish people living in Ireland. Its main focus was on people living outside Ireland whose political views, and actions, they regarded as critical for the maintenance of the Union.

In this sense, its pioneering methodology pre-figured by some three decades that of publications like the *Irish Bulletin*, widely circulated internationally during the War of Independence to friendly journalists and politicians in Britain, elsewhere in Europe and in the United States, as a way of energizing political opinion in favour of Irish independence. Its early issues carried, under the masthead, a mission statement:

A record of the sayings and doings of the Parnellite Party in the furtherance of their "Separatist" policy for Ireland; and of facts connected with the country. For the information of the Imperial Parliament, the Press, and the Public generally. It is hoped that the "sidelights" now presented may have some effect in producing a better understanding of things Irish than has hitherto been manifested by those amongst whom the "Notes From Ireland" circulate.⁵

The Minutes of the Unionist General Council contain frequent references to it, more particularly in the first decade of the twentieth century. A typical observation is that the "circulation [of *Notes*] among members of both houses of parliament, the offices of the principle daily papers, political reviews &c., and the general public, has had

⁴ Good, *loc. cit.*

⁵ Notes, 1, 25 September 1886, and 2, 2 October 1886.

perceptible effect both in conveying specific information as to the trend of the Irish Nationalist effort, and giving a lead to public opinion thereon.”⁶

Two years later the reference was more specific, observing that the *Notes* continued “to give attention to the interference in politics of the Gaelic League, an organization which has overstepped the bounds of its original, non-political constitution and which now, by the organs which support it, shows a determined purpose to assist in the severance between Ireland and Great Britain.”⁷

However, its initial focus seemed to be less on separatism than on the disputes about land and landlords which had lit the spark of Parnellism and which, *Notes from Ireland* set out to demonstrate, were consistently being misrepresented in the pro-Parnellite media. It set about this task in a number of different ways. One way was by carrying reports of court cases which demonstrated, to the editor’s satisfaction, the illogicalities, waywardness, and general comic-opera characteristics of nationalist plaintiffs, witness and indeed juries.

One of its most frequent sources was the Dublin *Daily Express*, a paper whose unique market appeal was composed in equal parts of die-hard Unionism and reliable racing tips. But the *Notes*’ substantial reliance on factual material, often culled from nationalist newspapers and presented in an anti-Nationalist context, also pre-figured the methodology of papers like Arthur Griffith’s *Scissors and Paste* (1915) and similar publications.

The practice of mining nationalist newspapers for propaganda purposes was, however, quite deliberate, particularly during periods when the Liberals, with their propensity to look favorably on Irish nationalist grievances, were in power at Westminster. During one of these periods the Unionist General Council noted specifically that during one year (1907-8) the size of the *Notes* had had to be increased owing to “the continued prevalence of disorder in Ireland” and the ‘apparently deliberate remissness of the authorities.’

“It is to be noted,” it added, “that the authorities quoted for these constantly recurring crimes and disorders are mainly Nationalist newspapers, a circumstance which on the face of it disproves the frequent Nationalist and Radical assertion that reports of Irish lawlessness are a Unionist ‘Campaign of Calumny.’”⁸

Its journalistic staff were, to it mildly, modest in number. John Edward Walsh of 21 Upper Pembroke Street, Dublin, a barrister and honorary secretary of the Irish Unionist Alliance, served, perhaps covertly, as editor, and contributions were generally unsigned, even in the later years when they were more overtly the political opinions of those involved in its production rather than mere transcripts from other publications. And the accounts of the ILPU and later of the IUA indicate that the IUA

⁶ Unionist Party, General Council Minute Book, PRONI D 989A1/14, Report for 1902.

⁷ Unionist Party, General Council Minute Book, PRONI D C/3/38, Report for 1904.

⁸ Unionist Party, General Council Minute Book, PRONI D 989 C/3/38, Report for 1907-8.

subscribed only to small handful of newspapers, and did not subscribe to many of the papers quoted in their columns. This – supported by the fact that the same accounts note the payment of small regular sums to Mr J.R. Clegg for “Press articles” (he was also in receipt of a salary) suggests that the sources for the many news reports in the *Notes* and attributed to various publications were in all probability Unionist journalists working on other newspapers, or indeed Unionist members of the general public, not only in Ireland but across Britain and in the United States and Canada.

“Wanted”, read a notice in its second issue, “information, accurate and concise, regarding every eviction that has taken place, or will take place, in Ireland during the year 1886. Forward at once to the chief office of the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union.”⁹

In December of the same year, their net was cast even wider. “We are anxious”, they told their readers, “to be informed as to the movements of the Home Rule propagandists of the Home Rule movement in England and Scotland.”¹⁰

Given that the major thrust of Irish nationalism at this period was against evictions and their alleged brutality and injustice, it may seem odd at first sight that this Unionist publication should go to such lengths to harvest as much information about evictions as they could, and frequently from publications of a nationalist hue. This can be understood, however, in the context of two other factors. One is that the *Notes* were, among other things, an early kind of media commentator, concerned to point out errors in nationalist press reports of evictions, as well as underlining the fact that many of these evictions had taken place only after lengthy non-payment of rent (in one case by an absentee tenant, now living in America, who owed more than £700 (some £81,200 sterling in today’s terms)).¹¹

A letter from an aggrieved landlord in Kerry, Lucy Thomson, highlighted the fact that a report in the nationalist *United Ireland* about supposed evictions from her estate in Co Kerry was false insofar as no eviction had taken place on the estate in the previous six years.¹² Another issue repeated with satisfaction a report from the *Irish Times* about an eviction carried out at the behest of a parish priest.¹³

More significant, perhaps, was the evidence of the political and psychological attitudes underpinning the editorial policy of the *Notes*, especially given the Southern Unionist input into their composition and distribution. The Southern Unionists were, in Ireland as a whole, not only a minority, but a minority of a minority. Their fellow-Unionists in the north east were differently, and more powerfully situated, not least because of their more potent role – based on their electoral strength - in the alliance with the Conservative party at Westminster.

While Northern Unionists, therefore, had a significant point of purchase in British politics, their Southern allies not only lacked this, but were even alienated, to varying

⁹ *Notes*, 2 October 1886.

¹⁰ *Notes*, 11 December 1886.

¹¹ *Notes*, 30 October 1886.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Notes*, 24 September 1887.

degrees, from the British administration in Ireland as represented by Dublin Castle and the occupant of the Vice-Regal lodge in the Phoenix Park. The journalist Warre B. Welles, for a time editor of the *Church of Ireland Gazette*, summed up the situation pithily in his memoir which, though published much later, reflected with some accuracy the degree to which the pro-Home Rule, Gladstonian attitudes of the Viceroy, Lord Aberdeen, whose first term as Viceroy spanned the critical years 1886-1893, and who was re-appointed for another critical decade after 1915) had changed the political chemistry of the capital city.

Welles observed:

Under the viceroyalty of Lord Aberdeen the social situation in Dublin was anomalous in the extreme. The Unionists, normally the sole *habitués* of Viceregal functions, boycotted a Court which they detested as much for its social policy as for its political bias. The shop-keepers of Dublin, Nationalists almost to a man, vied with each other for the cheap enough honour [...] While the Castle and the [Orange] Lodge hung uneasily like Mahomet's coffin between the heaven of respectability and the earth of ostracism, the true political centre of Ireland was not in Ireland at all; it was at Westminster.¹⁴

Seen in this context, the *Notes* can be seen, however anomalous it may sound, as part of the literature of victimhood, of protest against misunderstanding – even discrimination – and of profound social and political alienation. The Irish landlords, hurt by the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, had initially been tempted to support Isaac Butt, but by the time *Notes from Ireland* was launched, had become more revanchist under the twin influences of Ulster Unionism and British legislative and political vacillation

Thus, in October 1886, the *Notes* reported, with evident satisfaction, proceedings in a Co. Kerry court in which two defendants were accused of roughing up a sheriff's agent and repossessing a horse and cart that he had seized. After frequent interventions by a noticeably testy judge, the two defendants changed their pleas to guilty, but the jury still obstinately refused to return the guilty verdict as directed by the judge.

“You are,” the judge said with ill-concealed sarcasm, “a credit to the county Kerry. You could not sign that in the teeth of what I told you. So much for the intelligence of some of the jurors of the county Kerry.”¹⁵ I mentioned this to my colleague Professor Joe Lee, who like me was born in Kerry, and who cautioned me: “You may, perhaps, cast aspersions on the integrity of a Kerry jury – but not on their intelligence!”

More rumbustious proceedings featured in a later report from the Dublin Bankruptcy Court¹⁶ at which both John Dillon MP and William O'Brien appeared in court to sit beside and give psychological support to the debtor. When the bankrupt refused to take the oath, the judge warned him of the consequences. Undeterred, Mr. Moroney then – “speaking excitedly, with outstretched arms” – declaimed:

¹⁴ *Irish Indiscretions*, by Warre B Welles, London, Allen & Unwin, 1922, pp. 21-22.

¹⁵ *Notes*, 14 October 1886.

¹⁶ *Notes*, 28 January 1887.

Far dearer the grave or the prison,
Illumined by one patriot name,
Than the trophies of all who have risen
On liberty's ruin to fame.”

Myes na gCopaleen would have been envious.

However, the key event of this period was the British election period of 1885/6, during which there were two polls, in January 1886 and in August 1886, at the second of which Gladstone's pro-Home Rule government was assailed, and eventually displaced, by the alliance of the Conservatives and the Unionists. The *Notes* could not restrain their delights, and took care to underline the role of Irish unionists in achieving this result.

In preparation for the August election, according to the *Notes*, the Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union prepared, published and circulated, in other parts of the UK as well as Ireland, 11,122,100 leaflets, 520,300 pamphlets, 50,000 assorted tracts, **91,500** copies of the just-established *Notes from Ireland*, and 100,000 wall posters.¹⁷ Their delight might have been modified had they paid more heed to the warning by Lord Morley, who served intermittently as Chief Secretary for Ireland between 1886 and 1895, that “when it suits their own purpose the two English parties will unite to baffle or to crush the Irish, but neither of them will ever scruple to use the Irish in order to baffle or to crush their own rivals.”¹⁸

Undeterred by any such forebodings about British perfidy, the *Notes* reported that their activities “assisted in winning 38 seats, increasing the Unionist majorities in 38, and diminishing Gladstonian majorities in 28. The Union contributed to 10 Irish contests, and has made large grants to Revision expenses in 11 constituencies.” It is in the circumstances not surprising that the principal items in the monthly figures for expenditure of the Union were the substantial amounts paid to their printers, Crowe and Wilson of Dublin.¹⁹ Nor is it surprising that, while the finances of the IUA in Dublin seemed to be generally in good shape, the strain sometimes showed. The Unionist Party's finance committee later considered – but without taking a decision, “the question of the Unionist Associations of Ireland in future undertaking the full payment of the cost of Newspaper Articles, and half the cost of *Notes from Ireland*, it being understood that the compilation of same remains as at present.”²⁰ Nor were the *Notes* the sole Unionist propaganda outreach: the Unionist party's Parliamentary Committee approved, at one stage “a suggestion that a Reporter representing the

¹⁷ Notes, 15 January 1887.

¹⁸ James Winder Good, *Irish Unionism*, 176.

¹⁹ Just under £100 for the month of June 1909, for instance, or approximately £11,000 in 2016 values: Unionist Party Finance Committee Minutes, PRONI, D 989/a/1/9, 14 June 1909

²⁰ Unionist Party Finance Committee Minutes, PRONI, D 989/A/1/9, 14 June 1909

Times and the *Irish Times* should visit Galway, Clare, and other disturbed centres, and that *arrangements be made in advance, for his guidance* [emphasis added].²¹

The *Notes* acted, in a sense, almost like a Unionist mosquito press, highlighting occasions on which Catholic priests had protested against nationalist agrarian “outrages,” and by including letters to the Irish newspapers from “Catholic Loyalists”, and protests of varying intensity by a number of Catholic priests (including Bishop O’Dwyer of Limerick)²² against the more vigorous activities springing from the Plan of Campaign: the physical intimidation of landlords, and the tarring and feathering of young girls who had misfortunately engaged in social relationships with the constabulary. It gleefully recycled local press accounts of occasions such as at annual Congress of the GAA in Tipperary in 1887 when the clerically-led establishment’s proposals for the officer positions on the executive were rudely rejected by an O’Brienite crowd, and disturbances occurred in which a portion of the desk in front of the reporters was trampled down. “Father Scanlan fell back on the desk, a number of men were seized by the collars, loud cries arose, sticks were brandished, the priests were driven roughly about, and there was a sense of excitement that threatened every minute to develop into a riot.”²³

It was as alert to possible treachery from its own side as it was to welcome signs of support from Catholics who had not fallen under the Parnellite or separatist spell. It went to some lengths, for instance, to rubbish claims in the *Freeman’s Journal* about “Protestant Home Rulers”, contrasting these traitorous activities with the opposition of five priests from the Armagh diocese to the Plan of Campaign.²⁴ And it drew its readers’ attention to the dangers created by the fact that “the soft, cooing accents of the Protestant Home Rulers, as they style themselves, are falling on the ears of the agricultural labourers [at least of whom, it can be surmised, were Irish] in very many of the Southern English constituencies.”²⁵

A number of other regular features help to make it a useful vade-mecum even for contemporary historians. These included a regular feature on “Ireland in the magazines”, which was a bibliography of significant articles in British periodicals (including one by Erskine Childers); and lists, complete with dates, of offences against public order and societal equilibrium in general, of what were variously described, at different periods, as having been committed by Sinn Feiners, Redmondites, or the architects of sedition generally. These lists were supplemented by a “Diurnal” feature, some running to as many as ten pages, which gave dates and some details of politically and socially significant events in Ireland since the *Notes* were last published.²⁶

²¹ Unionist Party, Parliamentary Committee Minutes, 10 January 1912, PRONI D/989/A/1/9

²² *Notes*, 24 December 1887

²³ *Notes*, 5 November 1887.

²⁴ *Notes*, 14 May 1887. “Protestant Home Rulers” again came in for jaundiced mention on 4 June 1887.

²⁵ *Notes*, 15 January 1887.

²⁶ *Notes* were initially published fortnightly, but later became monthly and eventually, after the beginning of World War 1, quarterly. Its frequency was also interrupted in

It did not hesitate to supply its readers with helpful statistics contrasting Ireland and England to the benefit of the latter – in relation to public order offences such as drunkenness, for instance,²⁷ and illiteracy among voters.²⁸

All this information, while some of it was undoubtedly partial in the extreme, helps us to draw a more complex, and therefore more interesting, picture of Irish unionism towards the end of the 19th century than the one with which Irish students of history will generally be familiar. It is also valuable as a record – more detailed than that contained in the official documentation of the Unionist Party itself – of the *minutiae* of Southern Unionism. It chronicled, painstakingly, the activities of various Unionist organisations through Munster, Leinster and Connaught, including the formation and detailed membership of the party's youth organization, and its women's organization. Its pages are replete with accounts of the meetings of the IUA Executive, the size of whose membership – at more than 30, many of them peers – was to create political problems later on.

In the period covered by this paper, however, it is noteworthy that the coverage in *News from Ireland* of at least some of the seminal events in the modern Irish historical canon after 1910 was slight, almost tangential. This may be partly due to the fact that the leverage of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster was relatively speaking negligible between the 1890s and 1910; and to the relatively widespread coverage of Irish events in both the British and the American press during this period. Parnell's divorce in 1890, for example, is referred to only in the most oblique way: the first of its press transcripts in the relevant issue records a report from the *Cork Herald* of a speech in Mallow in the course of which the anti-Parnellite nationalist MP, Mr. J.C. Flynn, declared sourly that “for the past five years he [Parnell] had been a drag on the party and a disgrace to it (cries of ‘Hear, Hear’). Like Arbaces, the Egyptian, he spent his time coming out occasionally into public life, and going back again to his infamy.”²⁹ [See footnote]

The role of the IUA and its connection with journalism generally – and not just in Ireland - was underlined during preparations for the 1892 general election. It reported that in Great Britain no fewer than 22,500 copies of the *Notes* had been distributed, along with 10,000 pamphlets and 360,000 leaflets. Although this represented a diminution in the distribution of copies of the *Notes* compared to the previous election, a new development was the preparation and publication of annual volumes of the *Notes*, some of which still exist in public collections: in this period no fewer than 450 copies of these annual volumes were sold to no doubt eager subscribers.³⁰ In

1913 by “labour problems”. It was originally sold at a halfpenny, but by 1893 this had increased to a penny.

²⁷ *Notes*, 23 July 1887.

²⁸ *Notes* 1 October 1910, which demonstrated from official figures that more than 50% of the total number of illiterate voters in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland were those exercising the franchise in Ireland.

²⁹ *Notes*, 27 December 1890. Arbaces, one of the protagonists in a novel about the last days of Pompeii by Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1834, described as a scheming Egyptian sorcerer and a high priest of Isis.

³⁰ *Notes*, 5 September 1891.

the same year the *Notes* underlined the importance of the Alliance in organizing speakers for political meetings, sending Irish speakers to England and Scotland, and inviting Scottish speakers to Ireland. One of the latter, Lionel Pliegnier, was a journalist from East Perthshire, who had also visited some fourteen Irish constituencies to write articles for Scottish regional newspapers, and had already visited fourteen Irish counties in the Spring of 1891.

He now planned, the *Notes* informed its readers, “to devote a few weeks to working up the Unionist organisations in certain Irish constituencies. His work commences in the county of Louth, where there is a strong force of latent Unionism, which only requires to be worked out and brought out.”³¹ This very political journalist’s subsequent peregrinations through Dundalk, Ardee, Drogheda, Townley Hall and Collon were duly noted.

It is at first sight difficult to interpret, in the light of the available evidence, the fact that the *Notes* were editorially supportive of Wyndham’s Land Act.³² It is reasonable to suppose, however, that Irish Unionist landlords, particularly in the three Southern provinces, whose influence would have been substantial in the *Notes*, would have seen this legislation, however unwelcome, as an important counterweight to their fear that any increased self-government for Ireland might eventuate in even greater expropriation, as well as possibly drawing the teeth of radical peasant agitation.

The Liberal election victory in 1905 ended a decade of Conservative (and Unionist) rule, but the Irish question did not feature on the agenda substantially again until the election of 1910, when the Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, was forced to rely on John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party for support. This provoked a fresh frenzy of activity by the editors of the *Notes*, who organised a massive Unionist demonstration in Dublin on 26th November, and added to the production of the *Notes* an impressive array of no fewer than 50 different pamphlets about aspects of Unionist policy, and about the threatening activities of the “Separatists” following the introduction of the Home Rule Bill.³³

The editors of the *Notes* were also hyper-conscious of the significance of the American connection for Irish nationalism, not least financially. Their correspondents in the United States were quick to alert them to nationalist oratory by members of the Irish parliamentary party – including Redmond – who on occasion would let themselves be swayed by the enthusiasm of an Irish-American audience into eliding the difference between Home Rule and independence. As the *Notes* observed editorially in a passage which criticized “the shameless spirit of national mendicancy”:

“Money makes the mare go, whether it has legs or no, and without the Irish-American money – as both Mr. Redmond and Mr Devlin have publicly confessed – the Home Rule cause at home would be in a starved and starving condition.”³⁴

³¹ *Notes*, 22 August 1891.

³² *Notes*, 1 March and 1 April 1903, cited in Buckland, *infra*.

³³ *Notes*, 1 December 1910.

³⁴ *Notes*, 1 October 1910.

The advocates of Irish nationalism in the United States were, perhaps, more successful than they knew, including of course the IRB and Sinn Fein post-1916). Seven years later Lloyd George, then British foreign minister “appreciated the influence of the Irish-American vote on the result of the 1916 [US] Presidential election, and [. . .] realized the imperative need of counteracting the growth of anti-British feeling in the States.”³⁵

Lord Balfour spoke on the same topic to the American Ambassador in London, Walter H. Page, before leaving on a mission to the United States in the same year. Page replied bluntly to Balfour’s suggestion that perhaps American schoolbooks were responsible for this anti-British sentiment. “Their influence is not the main cause. It is the organized Irish. Then it’s the effect of the very fact that the Irish question is not settled. You’ve had that problem at your door for three hundred years. What is the matter that you don’t solve it?”³⁶

As Nicholas Mansergh commented: “At the most critical moment of a war to prevent the German domination of Europe the armed support of the United States was delayed until the President could reassure the American people as to the direction of English policy in Ireland.”³⁷ In this context, it is clear that the editors of the *Notes* had identified a powerful opponent correctly, even if the effect of their best efforts to neutralize it was doubtful. In this context, the *Notes* frequently set out to illuminate, with considerable evidence, their thesis that the Home Rule movement was in reality little more than a stalking horse, and that the ultimate policy objective, from Parnell through to Sinn Fein, was the complete constitutional separation of Ireland from England.

By November 1912 Unionist meetings had been held in every county, the *Notes* reported “with the exception of Mayo, owing to the Unionist population being so widely scattered”; some 2,197 meetings had been held in England, over half a million electors had been personally canvassed, and there had been a “large distribution” of the *Notes from Ireland* and similar political literature.³⁸ In this context, the *Notes* frequently set out to illuminate, with considerable evidence, their thesis that the Home Rule movement was in reality little more than a stalking horse, and that the ultimate policy objective, from Parnell through to Sinn Fein, was the

Graham Walker, who has written a valuable overview of this publication, has suggested that through publications such as *Notes from Ireland* Unionists in Ireland had, even into the period of the Third Home Rule Bill between 1912 and 1914, “lobbied British political opinion relentlessly and effectively, and they had reason to be confident that Britain would not sacrifice them to appease the demands of Irish nationalists.”³⁹

³⁵ Nicholas Mansergh, *Ireland in the age of Reform and Revolution*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1940, 237-8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Notes*, 1 November 1912.

³⁹ Graham Walker, *Notes from Ireland (1888-1938) a brief introduction to the Microfilm Edition*, Library, Queen’s University, Belfast, n.d.

We now know that this confidence was misplaced. With the benefit of hindsight, not least by reading today between the lines of the despatches in the *Notes*, we may conclude that two divisions were beginning to emerge; between Unionists in the three Southern provinces and their fellow-Unionists in Ulster, and between Southern Unionists themselves. In this context, the emphasis in the *Notes* on the weaknesses of British policy towards Ireland, and the mindset on which this was based, can be seen to have fatally under-estimated the significance of emergent nationalist feeling in the three Southern provinces, and equally fatally under-estimated the effect that the strength of Ulster Unionist opposition would have on British policy.

The creation and signing of the Ulster Covenant, it is true, was substantially reported; but even here, although the *Notes* hailed the fact that signatures appended to the Covenant in Dublin represented “every interest and class in the country”,⁴⁰ the actual figures printed in the *Notes* told a somewhat different story. While figures cited in R.B. McDowell’s history of Southern Unionism suggest that, in the city and county of Dublin, Protestants numbered over 100,000, or more than 21 per cent of the total population of the city,⁴¹ signatories to the Covenant at the Grafton Street headquarters of the Irish Unionist Association totaled only 23,217 – 5,055 of them women.⁴²

The 1913 Lock-out, or “The disorder in Dublin” came in for some barbed commentary in the “Notes and Comments” section of the *Notes*.⁴³ The editors of the *Notes* drew two morals from these events. The first was “the utter callousness of the Nationalist workers of the city with regard to the vaunted blessings of the coming Home Rule,” and the second was the noticeable absence of Irish Parliamentary Party members from the city at this juncture. It quoted – no doubt selectively - Larkin’s comment that “in this Home Rule Bill there is not a loaf of bread on the table for any man in Ireland”⁴⁴ and quoted pointedly from a poem in the socialist *Daily Herald* which reviled Redmond in favour of Larkin. By December they were hinting strongly, in all probability with tongue in cheek, that Larkinism was the greatest threat to a declining IPP under Redmond.⁴⁵

The outbreak of World War 1 forced a certain change of direction in the *Notes*, which noted “the consequent diversion of public concern from party politics to larger matters of public concern, which it sagaciously identified as “recruiting for the Army, and the dissensions in the Irish Nationalist Volunteers.”⁴⁶ It went further, stating that Irish loyalists in every part of the country were holding to the party truce and “have dropped their political propaganda in Great Britain and are doing all they can to stimulate in Ireland enlistment in the Army.”⁴⁷

⁴⁰ *Notes*, 1 October 1912.

⁴¹ R.B. McDowell, *Crisis and Decline: The Fate of the Southern Unionists*, Dublin, Lilliput Press, 1998, 4.

⁴² *Notes*, 1 December 1912.

⁴³ *Notes*, 1 October 1913.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *News*, 1 December 1913.

⁴⁶ *Notes*, 1 November 1914.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Even its (rare) advertisers got in on the act. Kapp and Peterson of Grafton Street advertised a new product in the September 1914 issue of the *Notes*: “The Carson Cigarettes” with the following appeal, not only to loyalism but to its opponents.

The makers state that they will devote a certain percentage of the profits to the Ulster Defence Fund. The “Carson” cigarettes are as excellent in flavor and arome as he political vause which has called them into being; and they may safely be recommended, not only to Unionists, but to those on the other side as well, as a modern equivalent of the famed “Pipe of peace.”

The coverage of the Larne gunrunning in the notes was conspicuous by its absence, although the *Notes* included a substantial innuendo that arms imported in the last three months of 1913 – an increase from four tons to thirteen tons over the corresponding period in the previous year – were for the use of the National Volunteers.⁴⁸ After the Larne gun-running in April 1914, it quoted, evidently with approbation, a report in the *Roscommon Herald* of Carson’s “formidable fighting machine”⁴⁹ and implied, not too regretfully, that there was simply an arms race between the two sides.⁵⁰

The first post-Rising issue of the *Notes* was dated 1 May 1916, but, as the editorial admitted, production difficulties had made it impossible to include any information about the situation later than Good Friday. Its subsequent issue, on 1 July, was an extended narrative of the events, but also included a specific editorial rebuttal of the nationalist argument that it had all been kick-started by the Larne gun-running.

“A much earlier date for the origin of the armed trouble in Ireland must be given. One must go back to the year of Mr. Bryce’s Chief Secretaryship. Mr Redmond and his Party did not rest until they got him to withdraw the Arms Act – then a great impediment to successful ‘virile agitation’ [. . .] It was during [Redmond’s] American visit that he glorified his efforts in effecting a free trade in firearms all over Ireland.”⁵¹

This legislative change, the *Notes* argued in the same article, was carried out “in utter opposition to Unionist appeal and argument.”

By August, the tone of the Southern Unionists, as expressed in the pages of the *Notes*, was a combination of condemnation and (at least partial) compromise. The heading on their diary of events had now been changed to “The Spread of Sinn Fein Republicanism”, and the material from Nationalist papers it quoted about recruiting was beginning to show the influence of the Sinn Fein movement in the disorganized and haphazard conditionality now being attached to the hitherto virtually unqualified Redmondite policy support for Irish enlistment.

The main part of this issue, however, was devoted to an account of the meeting between no fewer than 50 “gentlemen” representing the Unionist populations of the

⁴⁸ *Notes*, 1 February 1914.

⁴⁹ *Notes*, 1 May 1914.

⁵⁰ *Notes*, 18 April 1914

⁵¹ *Notes*, 1 July 1916.

south and the west, and the three Ulster counties of Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan, with the Unionist members of the cabinet. What was particularly interesting about this *cri de coeur* was that the delegation, while holding firm to their defence of the Union, left the door temptingly open to some form of policy change in that it committed itself to taking part in the projected post-war Conference on the governance of the empire “with an open mind, and the earnest desire that the question may be settled on the broad and Imperial lines which will embrace the whole of Ireland.”⁵²

A year later, a similarly eirenic note was being struck. Following the initial sessions of the Irish Convention, the *Notes* observed that the unionists of the three Southern provinces had “without any State guarantee of protection as has been given their brethren of Ulster in the event of Home Rule [. . .] consented to take part with their representative fellow-countrymen in the attempt to formulate a new system of Irish government, and to do all in their power to help it forward.”⁵³

Not long afterwards, however, the writing was – if not exactly on the wall - discernible at some distance. The following month, eirenicism had morphed into something approaching a Cassandra-like prediction of doom.

The Irish Convention, even though it were constituted of angels instead of men, cannot but be regarded as the savouring of a forlorn hope. Despite the harmonious disposition of the delegates, their quiet and diligent labours, and their unanimously sincere desire to produce something out of their deliberations that will be of lasting good, their task to outsiders would seem hopeless with such unsympathetic and harmful surroundings.”⁵⁴

The crumbling of Southern Unionism between 1916 and the creation of the Free State (which of course paralleled the crumbling of constitutional Irish nationalism) has been adequately explored elsewhere, notably by R.B. McDowell’s magisterial account. An intimate, almost blow-by-blow account by an Irish Unionist peer from Co. Wexford of the internal tensions and wrangling in the IUA can also be had from the Courttown papers,⁵⁵ but these have only one reference to the *Notes*. It is clear, however, that in the course of the internecine difficulties that now arose between hard-line Southern Unionists and their fellow-Unionists who, in the words of their angry Northern counterparts, had “publicly declared for Home Rule in the most drastic form,”⁵⁶ the control of the *Notes* had been wrested from the moderates led by Lord Midleton and commandeered by the hard-liners led by J.E. Walsh, the editor of the *Notes* since its inception. The publication continued in existence until 1938, and throughout this period remained a plangent witness to the feelings of abandonment, betrayal, and worse by the Southern Unionists. In this respect, the latter stages of this publication would perhaps be fruitful ground for a more detailed analysis of this unique social and political component of twentieth century Irish life than it has yet received.

⁵² Notes, 1 August 1916.

⁵³ Notes, 1 August 1917.

⁵⁴ Notes, 1 November 1917.

⁵⁵ TCD MSS 238-9.

⁵⁶ Minutes, Unionist General Council, 13 April 1918, PRONI D 989/A/1/10.

By the end of the day *Notes from Ireland* was, perhaps, no more than a finger, or a couple of fingers, in the dyke behind which the waters of Irish nationalism were rising precipitously. For a large part of its existence, however, a close examination suggests that it remains an irreplaceable guide not only to the political choices and priorities with which Southern Unionists – sometimes indeed mistakenly – felt they were faced, but also to the solutions they tried in vain to articulate.

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