

STEPHEN GWYNN AND THE FAILURE OF CONSTITUTIONAL NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT. *The Irish Party, the organization which represented the constitutional nationalist demand for home rule for almost fifty years in Westminster, was the most notable victim of the revolution in Ireland, c. 1916–23. Most of the last generation of Westminster-centred home rule MPs played little part in public life following the party’s electoral destruction in 1918. This article probes the political thought and actions of one of the most prominent constitutional nationalists who did seek to alter Ireland’s direction during the critical years of the war of independence. Stephen Gwynn was a guiding figure behind a number of initiatives to ‘save’ Ireland from the excesses of revolution. Gwynn established the Irish Centre Party in 1919, which later merged with the Irish Dominion League. From the end of 1919, Gwynn became a leading advocate of the Government of Ireland Bill, the legislation that partitioned the island. Revolutionary idealism – and, more concretely, violence – did much to render his reconciliatory efforts impotent. Gwynn’s experiences between 1919 and 1921 also, however, reveal the paralysing divisions within constitutional nationalism, which did much to demoralize moderate sentiment further.*

As the Great War lurched towards its bloody climax in 1918, the Irish nationalist maverick, William O’Brien, published a pamphlet proclaiming the death of the home rule project in Ireland. According to O’Brien, the politics of war had ‘rekindled Irish rancour against England and English rancour against Ireland’, to the utter ruin of constitutional nationalism.¹ This was a far cry from the heady days of the Edwardian era, when a measure of home rule seemed within reach, vindicating the strategy of the Irish Party under the leadership of John Redmond. Riding on the coat-tails of the constitutional crisis sparked by David Lloyd George’s controversial budget of 1909, which ultimately led to the erasing of the House of Lords’ absolute veto over Commons legislation, Redmond stood at the apex of his authority within nationalist Ireland. Expectations ran high that his

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* I am deeply indebted to Professor Roy Foster, Dr Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, Dr Senia Pašeta, the anonymous reviewers, and the editors of the *Historical Journal* for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ William O’Brien, *The downfall of parliamentarianism: a retrospect for the accounting day* (Dublin, 1918), p. 38.

leadership would achieve the goal which eluded even the enigmatic Charles Stewart Parnell: Irish self-government.

It was, however, a false dawn, as the war eclipsed the home rule project and provided the context for the destruction of the Irish Party. Another victim of this process was the imperially minded conciliatory nationalism that Redmond epitomized. Redmond's imagined Ireland was one reconciled under home rule and at the heart of the British empire. Sinn Féin's impressive performance in Ireland in the December 1918 general election pointed to a rather different ideal: one more radical and separatist. The scale of Sinn Féin's victory appears irrefutable – seventy-three seats against the Irish Party's six – with many of its candidates elected without contest. Yet even with its local organization in terminal decline during the war years,² the Irish Party still managed to win one fifth of the total votes cast, and indeed polled credibly in certain areas.³ The large number of uncontested constituencies in 1918 renders election returns for Ireland a problematic gauge of public opinion, but the 220,837 Irish Party votes, alongside the solid unionist bloc in north-east Ulster, suggest that Sinn Féin's hegemony was incomplete.⁴ It also implied that constitutional nationalism perhaps still had a political base in Ireland – albeit a scattered and demoralized one – despite the obliteration of the national party.

The last generation of Westminster-centred home rulers have rarely been the focus of study after 1918. Few played any public role: John Dillon, the Irish Party's leader after Redmond's death in March 1918, retired from public life in the wake of the electoral massacre, the only course being, as he put it, 'to stand aside and let S[inn] F[éin] and L[loyd] G[eorge] fight it out'.⁵ But not all constitutional nationalists adopted this view as 1919 opened. One of Redmond's most prominent supporters rejected the notion that home rulers should stand aside from the forthcoming battle; rather, Anglo-Irish relations could yet still be saved on mutually beneficial lines through innovative political thinking and quick action.

The proponent of this ideal was Stephen Gwynn, formerly MP for Galway City, and the most senior Protestant member of the home rule party during its final decade. Gwynn played an active role in various spheres of Irish public life, political, literary, and cultural. The focus of this article, though, is his political career, which provided the Redmondite brand of moderate Irish nationalism with a brief afterlife. Following Gwynn's election defeat in 1918, he became involved in several initiatives to 'save' politics from Irish republican and British militancy. Crucial to these activities was Gwynn's experience of the Irish Convention of 1917–18, which brought the Redmondites close to securing a deal

² As demonstrated in Michael Wheatley, *Nationalism and the Irish Party: provincial Ireland, 1910–1916* (Oxford, 2005).

³ Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party, 1916–1923* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 165.

⁴ Paul Bew, 'Moderate nationalism and the Irish revolution, 1916–1923', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), p. 735.

⁵ F. S. L. Lyons, *John Dillon: a biography* (London, 1968), p. 455.

with the dwindling band of southern unionists. Gwynn was drafted into the Irish Party's negotiating team at the eleventh hour, replacing John Redmond's brother, Willie, who died in battle in Messines in 1917. Gwynn was the logical substitute: like Willie, he was also a soldier-MP, having served in Europe on two separate occasions between 1915 and 1917.⁶ He fully embraced the ideals of wartime Redmondism: that the common sacrifice of Irishmen, Protestant and Catholic, in the trenches of Europe had the power to shatter ancient barriers that kept them bitterly divided at home.⁷ Prior to the war, Gwynn, like the vast majority of Irish nationalists, rejected the case for Ulster exceptionalism from a home rule settlement.⁸ Serving in the trenches alongside Ulstermen in the face of a common enemy, however, dramatically altered his political outlook: the bonds of war prompted him to work more for national reconciliation than national autonomy. The Irish Convention model, which offered a practical framework to promote reconciliation, resonated in Gwynn's mind as he explored the political landscape of the post-war period. An escape from extremism was essential for Irish political life, particularly after violent manifestations came to the fore. Gwynn was appalled at the events of the Easter Rising of 1916: the divisive nature of republican violence was a central theme of his writings during the revolutionary period and after. In 1935, he referred to the friendly feeling between the Irish and Ulster Divisions born 'in the mud of Passchendaele': 'What was done there was undone later in Ireland.'⁹ But from 1919 to 1921, Gwynn did not take this as a certainty: his efforts to regroup the scattered elements of moderate Irish politics – ostensibly the two endangered species, the Redmondites and southern unionists – reveal that he saw nothing inevitable about their eventual defeat.

The historiography of home rule typically ceases with the 1918 election.¹⁰ While Paul Bew has employed the writings of Stephen Gwynn and other sidelined constitutional nationalists in his examination of the Irish revolution (c. 1916–23), his analytical gaze focuses on retrospective accounts rather than contemporary actions.¹¹ It is only in recent decades that scholars have escaped the influential, but flawed, framework of revolutionary history expressed most persuasively by W. B. Yeats. This retrospectively over-exaggerated the influence of 'cultural' nationalism to the detriment of the home rule movement in the march to Irish independence, stressing the Gaelic language and Anglo-Irish literary revivals as crucial forces in awakening the soul of the nation, culminating in the

⁶ Stephen Gwynn, *John Redmond's last years* (London, 1919), pp. 269–70.

⁷ This ideal was articulated throughout John E. Redmond, *The Irish nation and the war: extracts from speeches made in the House of Commons and in Ireland since the outbreak of the war* (Dublin, 1915).

⁸ See Gwynn's *The case for home rule* (Dublin, 1911) for an example of this.

⁹ Stephen Gwynn, *Ireland in ten days* (London, 1935), p. 237.

¹⁰ An exception to this is Alvin Jackson's invaluable *Home rule: an Irish history, 1800–2000* (London, 2003), which charts the afterlife of home rule in the form of devolution in Northern Ireland.

¹¹ Bew, 'Moderate nationalism'.

litterateur-led Rising of 1916.¹² But politics did not ‘stop’ following the fall of Parnell, contrary to Yeats’s assertion.¹³ This has been amply demonstrated by recent research stressing the vitality of the Redmondite project, the Irish Party’s grip over provincial Ireland, and expectations of the emerging generation of young home rulers during the Edwardian period.¹⁴ But the lingering afterlife of constitutional nationalism has escaped the attention of many historians of the Irish war of independence (1919–21).¹⁵ Scholarly interest in this period clusters around the dynamics of the Irish armed struggle, construction of the revolutionary administration, and British military reactions.¹⁶ This research has been supplemented with a burgeoning body of local studies highlighting substantial regional variations of the conflict,¹⁷ and a number of compelling biographical studies of the revolutionary elite.¹⁸ In marked contrast to this dynamic literature, the losing side of the Irish revolution – constitutional nationalism – has been neglected, with the moderate nationalist critique of the republican campaign and its alternative political programme lost amidst the revolutionary narrative. Between 1919 and 1921, as in the aftermath of Parnell’s fall, constitutional politics did not stop. Indeed, politics remained in a state of flux from the immediate aftermath of the 1918 election to the truce between republican and crown forces in July 1921, with Sinn Féin in no way certain of achieving its separatist ambitions. New formations of constitutional nationalism surfaced during the war of independence, providing a coda of sorts for the Irish Party. The bloodshed of the period, however, undermined the power of constitutional nationalism, which lacked the urgency and active support to alter the course of conflict. Moreover, violence also exacerbated the difficulties of including Ulster in a political settlement, a problem to which Sinn Féin offered no viable solution. Crucially, the scholarly neglect of post-1918 constitutional nationalism has had the net effect of underplaying

¹² As expressed most forcibly during Yeats’s lecture from 1923, ‘The Irish dramatic movement’, reprinted in *Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (London, 1999), p. 410.

¹³ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, 1988), pp. 431–3.

¹⁴ Paul Bew, *Conflict and conciliation in Ireland, 1890–1910: Parnellites and radical agrarians* (Oxford, 1987); Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish question: Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism, 1912–1916* (Oxford, 1994); Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life, 1891–1918* (Dublin, 1999); Wheatley, *Nationalism and the Irish Party*; Senia Pašeta, *Before the revolution: nationalism, social change and Ireland’s Catholic elite, 1879–1922* (Cork, 1999).

¹⁵ A notable exception is Senia Pašeta, ‘Ireland’s last home rule generation: the decline of constitutional nationalism in Ireland, 1916–1930’, in Mike Cronin and John M. Regan, eds., *Ireland: the politics of independence, 1922–1949* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 13–31.

¹⁶ The best examples of each of these themes are Peter Hart, *The IRA and its enemies: violence and community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 1998); Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary government in Ireland: Dáil Éireann, 1919–1922* (Dublin, 1995); and Charles Townshend, *The British campaign in Ireland, 1919–1921: the development of political and military policies* (Oxford, 1975).

¹⁷ The classic example is David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish life: provincial experience of war and revolution* (Dublin, 1977); but also see Hart, *The IRA and its enemies*; and Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution, 1910–1923* (Dublin, 2001).

¹⁸ See, for example, Peter Hart, *Mick: the real Michael Collins* (London, 2005); Richard English, *Ernie O’Malley: IRA intellectual* (Oxford, 1998); Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy: a self-made hero* (Oxford, 2005).

contemporary criticisms of the divisiveness of the republican armed campaign. This article explores these themes through an examination of the thought, actions, and writings of one of the revolution's losers. Gwynn offered an original analysis of the Ulster problem from a nationalist framework during the years of the war of independence; he was also a prominent critic of the excesses of republican – and British – violence.

I

The loss of his parliamentary seat in December 1918 did not dampen Gwynn's enthusiasm to remain in public life, in contrast to the majority of his former Irish Party colleagues. Shortly after his election defeat, Gwynn contacted Lord Midleton, the leader of southern unionism, outlining his intention to raise a new political movement from the ashes of moderate nationalism and unionism. Midleton had been a major influence in pushing for southern unionism's acceptance of a home rule settlement during the Irish Convention: Gwynn pinned hopes on him that a 'Convention party' could be established to find a middle way between the extremes of Sinn Féin and Ulster unionism. The vehicle to settle Irish differences, Gwynn told Midleton, was a new organization to promote Irish self-government while recognizing the distinctiveness of Ulster: in other words, federalism.¹⁹ On the final day of 1918, the *Freeman's Journal* published a letter from Gwynn calling for the formation of a federalist party. What was urgently needed, he argued, was a new moderate organization to attract nationalists and unionists under a federal banner, imbued with the spirit of the Irish Convention.²⁰

Federalism – in its many different guises – was a political programme which periodically appealed to Irish nationalists in the decades after the Act of Union. Gwynn, for one, dabbled with federal ideas throughout his career. Whilst in London during the Boer war period, he encountered the renowned English imperialist and constitutional thinker, F. S. Oliver, and they subsequently enjoyed an enduring friendship based on a mutual obsession with politics.²¹ Oliver was a prominent figure in the Round Table, the group established in 1909 to promote federalism as a step to imperial unity.²² With the political crisis unleashed by Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' in 1909 threatening the very constitution of Britain, ideas of 'home rule all round' gained currency within certain imperialist political circles: federalization of the United Kingdom emerged as a potential means to preserve the unity of the Union and empire. Oliver was an important figure in popularizing the discourse of federalism during the Edwardian period; his influence on Gwynn can be gleaned from the Irishman's support for 'home rule all round' as a potential compromise to the constitutional stalemate in

¹⁹ Gwynn to Midleton, n.d. [Dec. 1918], London, The National Archives (TNA), Midleton papers, PRO 30/67/39.

²⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 31 Dec. 1918.

²¹ Stephen Gwynn, *Experiences of a literary man* (London, 1926), p. 223. Gwynn later edited an edition of Oliver's letters: *The anvil of war: letters between F. S. Oliver and his brother, 1914–1918* (London, 1936).

²² John Kendle, *The Round Table movement and imperial union* (Toronto, 1975).

1910.²³ Gwynn's early interest in federalism was based on the notion that Ireland and Britain should be treated as a unitary administrative unit with autonomous regional assemblies. But Gwynn recognized Ireland as one unit, not two, in the pre-war period: he had little to say about the position of Ulster in such a scheme, and only moved towards the idea of *internal* Irish federalism after the Easter Rising as a means to secure a speedy enactment of self-government. Federalist schemes were, however, controversially received within nationalist Ireland.²⁴ Francis Cruise O'Brien, for example, voiced discomfort with the principle of 'home rule all round' in a response to Oliver's proposals: 'A federated United Kingdom supposes that English and Irish interests are identical. History has something to say on the point.'²⁵ Although a solution with a federal heart was rendered redundant by the introduction of the more straightforward 'Gladstonian' home rule bill in April 1912, the use of federalism to recognize regional differences whilst sustaining a unitary state loomed large in Gwynn's mind as the Irish question mutated throughout the next decade.

The grandeur of Gwynn's post-war federalist vision was, however, almost immediately deflated with Lord Midleton's rejection of his terms; instead, Midleton led a split within unionism and established a separate organization, the Anti-Partition League.²⁶ Gwynn, however, remained undeterred by such a conspicuous snubbing. Several days later, he appeared at an 'Irish Federalism versus Irish Republic' debate in Dublin's Abbey Theatre, where he insisted, to a packed audience, that the key issue facing Irish nationalists was the north: the Ulster question was Sinn Féin's Achilles' heel, for which it offered no solution. The natural outcome of Sinn Féin's drive for an Irish republic, argued Gwynn, was 'one which was fatal to Irish unity, because Ulster would never agree to it'; Sinn Féin's 'conception of nationality was narrow and tribal'. Federalism was advocated as the only available political bridge to link Ulster with southern Ireland. Gwynn's republican opponent for the evening, P. S. O'Hegarty, merely dismissed the existence of an 'Ulster question', which reflected the audience's general feeling.²⁷

On 21 January 1919, two events occurred which have traditionally been interpreted as marking the opening of the Irish war of independence: the first meeting of the underground parliament, Dáil Éireann, and the murder of two police constables by the Irish Volunteers (soon to be rechristened the Irish Republican Army) at Soloheadbeg, county Tipperary.²⁸ Against this unpropitious backdrop, the Irish Centre Party was launched several days later, with Gwynn named chair of its provisional general committee. The Centre Party was a small body

²³ 'Pacifcus' [F. S. Oliver], *Federalism and home rule* (London, 1910); *Hansard*, 5th series, XVI, 11 Apr. 1910, col. 929.

²⁴ See, for example, Michael Wheatley, 'John Redmond and federalism in 1910', *Irish Historical Studies*, 32 (2001), pp. 343–64.

²⁵ *Leader*, 22 Oct. 1910.

²⁶ Midleton to Gwynn, 30 Dec. 1918, TNA, Midleton papers, PRO 30/67/39.

²⁷ *Irish Times*, 6 Jan. 1919.

²⁸ Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish war of independence* (Dublin, 2002), p. 25.

dominated by professional men and women, several of whom were well known, but most with little or no experience of public life. The party's notables included the barrister, W. E. Wylie, the academic, Charles Oldham, and, most prominently, the army general, Sir Hubert Gough.²⁹ Gough was the brigadier-general who had voiced concerns about being sent to suppress Ulster unionism in 1914 at the height of the home rule crisis. The 'Curragh incident', as it became known, confirmed that the government could not be used to enforce home rule in Ulster: Gough headed a body of cavalry officers who announced that they would resign if ordered north. The Great War, however, changed Gough's outlook on Irish politics. After serving in Europe with Gwynn, Willie Redmond, and other nationalists, Gough came to believe that unionism and nationalism in Ireland could be reconciled under a measure of home rule.³⁰ He refused an offer made by Sir Edward Carson to stand as an Ulster unionist MP in the 1918 election; instead, as Gough announced in a public letter, he was now committed to 'brotherhood and conciliation' in Ireland, which he believed could be achieved through the Centre Party.³¹ This was Redmondism without Redmond, the very sentiment that Gwynn attempted to mine over the next few years.

The Centre Party's federal programme recognized that the Irish constitutional debate had fundamentally altered since the Edwardian period. The party's primary aim was not to redesign the Union to accommodate Ireland, but instead to reconcile Ireland's internal divisions. The party advanced a programme advocating the creation of a self-governing Ireland within the British empire, with a central parliament for national affairs and four provincial assemblies to tackle local issues. This had been the basis of a scheme that the Irish Convention received from Joseph Alexander Moles, an Ulster-born businessman, which Gwynn immediately supported.³² Gwynn's attempt to convert Redmond to this form of thinking in 1917 was, however, unsuccessful.³³ In his review of the Convention in 1919, Gwynn lamented that 'there was a strong feeling against anything that looked like partition', but he was adamant that federalism was something that should 'have been much more fully explored',³⁴ which was what he intended to do with the Centre Party. It could be argued that Gwynn was underestimating the seemingly intractable Ulster problem with federal abstractions, but this is to miss his point. In the summer of 1919, he argued that 'Ireland, if it includes Ulster, is today not a nation in being. It is only the makings of a nation.'³⁵ Given that he recognized Ulster's concerns with the Irish self-governing project, Gwynn's emphasis on the need for *four* provincial parliaments may seem superfluous; but he envisaged a federal framework for Ireland's

²⁹ *Irish Independent*, 24 Jan. 1919.

³⁰ General Sir Hubert Gough, *Soldiering on* (London, 1954), p. 182.

³¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Jan. 1919.

³² Copies of this scheme have survived in London, Parliamentary Archives (PA), Lloyd George papers, LG/F/137/6/8 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, H. E. Duke papers, dep. C. 715 (115-41).

³³ Gwynn to Redmond, 24 Oct. [1917], Dublin, National Library of Ireland (NLI), John Redmond papers, MS 15,192/9.

³⁴ Gwynn, *Redmond's last years*, p. 286.

³⁵ *Observer*, 27 July 1919.

constitutional design as the means for the provinces to meet on an equal footing, thereby weakening Ulster's sense of 'difference' and fostering an all-island unity.³⁶

Disappointingly for Gwynn, though, his plan failed to reignite the wider federal debates of the Edwardian period within influential British constitutional circles. In the aftermath of the war, the eyes of political thinkers in Britain were firmly on the peace conference in Paris, with most attention paid to the formation of the League of Nations and the growth of dominion governments.³⁷ The Round Table, through their journal, reported on the Centre Party's founding, but in rather downbeat terms. Citing a lack of popular support within Ireland as the major problem facing the Centre Party, the *Round Table* also asserted that creation of four provincial assemblies would not reconcile the north-eastern counties of Ulster to rule from a central Dublin parliament.³⁸ This pessimistic assessment was coloured by the rise of Sinn Féin, whose narrow and unrepentant appeal to Irish nationalism encountered increasing disillusionment on the part of British federalist observers.³⁹ Gwynn's efforts to build a federalist political party in Ireland thus went largely unsupported in those British circles from which he might have expected intellectual and material encouragement.

The Centre Party was a small organization: as Gwynn lamented, his new movement was 'much better off for brains than for money'.⁴⁰ But in March 1919, Gwynn gained an opportunity to reach a mass audience through his appointment as special Irish correspondent of *The Observer*, the London-based Sunday paper. Appearing weekly until the first half of 1925 and more sporadically thereafter, Gwynn's crisply written *Observer* articles offered piercing commentaries on the subsequent course of politics in Ireland, north and south. The first few articles were wide-ranging in scope: the plight of ex-soldiers (Gwynn was also a member of the short-lived Irish Demobilization Committee); John Redmond's vision of Irish unity; and the need for progressive social policies in Ireland. These discussions partly reflected, as he recognized, the disquieting lack of political activity in early 1919.⁴¹ Throughout the year, Gwynn identified a dangerously apathetic British policy towards Ireland as a major obstacle in the path of moderate political figures, but reasoned that the Irish question could nevertheless still be solved on federal lines. The context in which Gwynn made this claim should not be lost: militarily, there was no 'war of independence'. Violent activities by republicans remained erratic for some time after the Soloheadbeg assault, with Sinn Féin unwilling to escalate the conflict and most IRA efforts focusing on seizing weapons and ammunition from the police.⁴² Amidst this lull, Gwynn argued that the time had come for home rule with a federal twist to pre-empt Sinn Féin's further

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31 Aug. 1919.

³⁷ Kendle, *Round Table*, pp. 248–73.

³⁸ *Round Table*, 9 (1918–19), p. 583.

³⁹ G. K. Peatling, 'The last defence of the Union? The Round Table and Ireland, 1910–1925', in Andrea Bosco and Alex May, eds., *The Round Table: the empire/commonwealth and British foreign policy* (London, 1997), p. 291.

⁴⁰ *Observer*, 23 Mar. 1919.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2, 9, 23 Mar. 1919.

⁴² Townshend, *British campaign in Ireland*, pp. 19–20.

growth; British failure to enact home rule would demonstrate to the Irish, he prompted, that ‘the separatists were right’.⁴³

This was a point that Gwynn understood only too well while attempting to spread the Centre Party’s vision. At a meeting in March in Newry, county Down, Gwynn was interrupted during an address focusing on the workings of federalism in the British dominions, Switzerland, and the United States of America. When challenged about his commitment to the ‘Irish nation’, Gwynn responded angrily:

‘We will never have a nation’ the Captain [Gwynn] replied, ‘until we are united and that is what we are out to accomplish.’ (General disorder, cheers and cries of ‘Sit down, John Bull’ and ‘Ireland is one and undivided.’) ‘She is anything but that’, observed Captain Gwynn, who added: ‘She is totally divided.’

The message was lost in the confusion: Gwynn was howled down and forced to conclude his speech prematurely.⁴⁴ Creating a meaningful centrist party during 1919 was a testing experience, and the difficulties Gwynn encountered may have prompted him to merge his organization with Sir Horace Plunkett’s newly formed movement, the Irish Dominion League.

Plunkett was the founder and leader of the Irish co-operative movement: his Edwardian *modus operandi* was concentration on economic development, rather than the national question. His path had crossed with Gwynn’s during the Irish Convention, which Plunkett chaired. Fearing the growth of post-war political extremism, Plunkett launched the Irish Dominion League in June 1919, partnered by a weekly ‘unofficial’ organ, *The Irish Statesman*.⁴⁵ Plunkett claimed he had contacts inside the moderate wing of Sinn Féin, from which he believed that a majority within the new nationalism would accept dominion home rule – in other words, a full measure of self-government – encompassing the entire island of Ireland.⁴⁶ Gwynn warmly greeted Plunkett’s ideas, particularly after Plunkett conceded that ‘there would be ample room for provincial rights’ within an Irish dominion. Gwynn took this to mean that ‘the idea of a settlement which would give to Ulster what Quebec has in Canada appears to be gaining ground’;⁴⁷ but this federal analogy was a marked over-reading of Plunkett’s position. Gwynn’s public support for Plunkett’s dominion scheme came after private negotiations between the three moderate political movements in Ireland – Plunkett and his followers, Lord Midleton’s Anti-Partition League, and Gwynn’s Centre Party – were held with the view of constructing unity of purpose. Midleton decided to remain aloof, but Gwynn and Plunkett reached agreement and decided to merge their organizations. As Warre B. Wells, editor of *The Irish Statesman* and participant at the negotiations, later observed, however, Plunkett was uneasy with Gwynn’s insistence that Ulster be afforded special constitutional conditions

⁴³ *Observer*, 9 Mar. 1919.

⁴⁴ *Irish Independent*, 8 Mar. 1919.

⁴⁵ *Irish Statesman*, 5 July 1919, claimed independence from the Dominion League, but Plunkett was bankrolling the paper. Sir Horace Plunkett dairies (microfilm), 2 June 1919, Belfast Central Library (BCL).

⁴⁶ Pašeta, ‘Ireland’s last home rule generation’, p. 24.

⁴⁷ *Observer*, 20 Apr. 1919.

within an all-Ireland settlement; Plunkett certainly would not have adopted the Canadian parallel.⁴⁸ The difficulties posed by Ulster threatened the harmony between Gwynn and Plunkett from the beginning of their joint venture, and eventually split the movement amidst rising levels of political violence in Ireland over the next two years.

The first edition of *The Irish Statesman* carried the Irish Dominion League's manifesto, stating that the movement's primary aim was to establish self-government for Ireland within the empire. Once this was achieved, Irish representation at Westminster would cease, and Ireland would take its place alongside the other British dominions in the newly founded League of Nations. Minority rights would be protected within the dominion settlement, and the manifesto made a direct appeal to Ulster unionism to express what 'special safeguards they demand'.⁴⁹ Boasting an impressive and diverse cast of supporters, such as Lords Monteagle and Fingall, Henry Harrison, and Francis Cruise O'Brien, the Dominion League, Gwynn believed, had become 'the rallying point of a new constitutional movement in Ireland'.⁵⁰ The Centre Party merged with the Dominion League a week before the manifesto was published.⁵¹ The Dominion League's demand for dominion status represented much more than the Centre Party's federalist scheme; moderate Irish nationalist opinion had advanced dramatically since the days of the limited freedoms of home rule.

Reaction to the Dominion League's programme was, however, uniformly negative. Plunkett's initiative, which aimed to bridge the philosophies of unionism and nationalism, was successful in only one measure: both were united in disdain of the League. Unsurprised at the negative response which greeted the Dominion League, Gwynn suggested in *The Observer* that many Irish people believed the British government would soon have to deal constructively with Ireland: it would thereby offer more concessions if confronted with Sinn Féin's demand for a republic, rather than with the League's more pragmatic approach.⁵² Gwynn offered no ideas as to how to alter this scenario, which perhaps contained more than a hint of truth. In terms of bargaining positions, the Dominion League had left itself with little room to manoeuvre after publicly declaring that its programme represented 'the irreducible *minimum* of the Irish demand'.⁵³ But the League also faced a challenge to be taken seriously by both the British government and Irish electorate following an upsurge of revolutionary violence in the summer of 1919. Several days after the Centre Party merged with the Dominion League, a Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) district inspector was shot in the head in broad daylight in Thurles, county Tipperary. Such attacks thereafter became more widespread,

⁴⁸ Warre B. Wells, *Irish indiscretions* (London, 1922), pp. 90–1.

⁴⁹ *Irish Statesman*, 28 June 1919.

⁵⁰ *Observer*, 29 June 1919.

⁵¹ See the letter from Gwynn to Plunkett, 20 June 1919, published in the *New Statesman*, 5 July 1919; *Observer*, 29 June 1919.

⁵² *Observer*, 6 July 1919.

⁵³ *Irish Statesman*, 12 July 1919. To further this point, the emphasis is found in the original.

and the constitutional thinking propounded by the Dominion League lost much of its energy in the face of a violent alternative.

Following the Thurles murder, the lord lieutenant of Ireland, Lord French, pushed successfully for more draconian measures to counter Sinn Féin. The organization was made illegal (along with other nationalist bodies, such as the Gaelic League) in Tipperary, a particular hotspot of conflict. Throughout the summer of 1919, the IRA intensified its campaign against the RIC, leading to the national suppression of Dáil Éireann and Sinn Féin in September. Moderates such as Gwynn were horrified at the turn of events, fearing that the political vacuum would be filled only by 'murders in plenty'.⁵⁴ After a month of inactivity, the government finally decided to grasp the nettle by introducing an Irish initiative to undermine Sinn Féin's support. The resultant Government of Ireland Act would formally divide the island into two administrative areas; Gwynn's influence can be detected in its rationale, as he moved into yet another mode to shore up moderate nationalist politics in Ireland and halt the divisive course of political extremism.

II

At the end of September 1919, the British cabinet was informed that the home rule bill of 1914 – suspended for the war's duration – would come into force following ratification of the final peace treaties in Europe. Irish opinion had mutated so much since August 1914 that the bill would have been a wholly inadequate measure to confront the difficulties of establishing Irish self-government in 1919, a point the cabinet conceded.⁵⁵ Moderate opinion was now campaigning for dominion status for Ireland, which was a substantial departure from the Asquithian pre-war measure, and the question of Ulster still had to be addressed. More worryingly for British policy makers, Sinn Féin's drive for a republic also showed little sign of abating. After a year of inactivity, the government was forced to tackle the Irish problem directly: a committee under Sir Walter Long's chairmanship was established to investigate suitable forms of governance for Ireland.

Long's standing in London's high political circles made him a natural choice to head the new committee – at least from a British perspective.⁵⁶ But his selection further antagonized nationalist opinion as he was, after all, a former leader of the unionist party and a vocal opponent of home rule. Gwynn, however, expressed satisfaction with the committee's composition, informing *Observer* readers that 'to have Mr Long committed to the support of a Home Rule scheme is the best possible proof of how far and how permanently public opinion in Great Britain has advanced on the whole matter. This Ireland does not realise'.⁵⁷ But

⁵⁴ *Observer*, 10, 17 Aug., 21 Sept. 1919.

⁵⁵ Cabinet conclusions, 25 Sept. 1919, TNA CAB/23/12.

⁵⁶ John Kandle, *Walter Long, Ireland and the Union, 1905–1920* (Montreal and Kingston, 1992), p. 181.

⁵⁷ *Observer*, 19 Oct. 1919.

any logic in Gwynn's case was lost in the aftermath of the committee's deliverance of its findings in December 1919. Long's committee declared that home rule should provide the constitutional framework to an Irish settlement, but Ulster should receive a substantial concession in the form of partition and its own parliament. Long's report provided the skeleton of the Government of Ireland Bill of the following year.

Partition was long a blasphemy to Irish nationalism; the constitutional framing of such a policy further dented nationalist Ireland's confidence in the British state. But Gwynn had come to believe that the partition of Ireland reflected political realities, and he emerged as the scheme's most vocal supporter from within the wider nationalist family. Replying to criticisms of his pro-partitionist thinking made by the *Irish Independent*, Gwynn, himself a Protestant Ulsterman, argued that the north-eastern counties could never be assimilated with the rest of Ireland 'any more than Quebec to the rest of Canada'. The logic of this claim was that Ulster should be granted its own institutions as 'a necessary stepping-stone to securing Ulster's full concurrence and assistance in the general control and direction of Irish nationalist affairs'.⁵⁸ There was also another dimension to Gwynn's advocacy of partition, namely the nature of republican coercion. The IRA's violent campaign against the state merely confirmed Protestant Ulster's sense of difference from nationalist Ireland. As Gwynn insisted in *The Observer*, the excesses of republicanism had 'made Ulster's case for them as they could never have made it for themselves'.⁵⁹ Such thinking was, however, antithetical to the views of the Dominion League. Plunkett chaired a League meeting convened in November which rejected Long's proposals; although Gwynn was unable to attend, he indicated that he supported the creation of two parliaments which would at least place the government of the entire island into Irish hands. 'If this proposal is put forward', Gwynn told Plunkett in advance of the meeting, 'I shall support it by all means in my power'.⁶⁰ Yet the chances that the Dominion League would also support such a scheme were slim: Plunkett fiercely rejected partition, believing that 'it would plunge Ireland into rebellion'.⁶¹ The differences between Gwynn and Plunkett became more pronounced when *The Irish Statesman* publicly attacked Gwynn's belief that 'there are two Irelands'.⁶²

Somewhat fittingly, amidst these emerging disputes within moderate nationalism over partition, Gwynn's *John Redmond's last years* was published at the end of 1919. Gwynn was the author of numerous books, but *Redmond's last years* is his most outstanding literary achievement, offering as it does a lucid insight into the final phase of the Irish Party from the third home rule bill to the death of Redmond in 1918. The book established Redmond as a totemic figure for

⁵⁸ *Irish Independent*, 15 Oct. 1919.

⁵⁹ *Observer*, 2 Nov. 1919.

⁶⁰ Gwynn to Plunkett, 18 Nov. 1919, Lord Lothian papers, Edinburgh, National Archives of Scotland (NAS), GD40/17/610/2(i).

⁶¹ Sir Horace Plunkett diaries (microfilm), 20 Nov. 1919, BCL. ⁶² *Irish Statesman*, 29 Nov. 1919.

Gwynn's own particular post-war brand of pluralistic and conciliatory politics: Redmond's imperialism and sincere tolerance, two traits close to Gwynn's heart, were emphasized throughout. Crucially, though, the book critiqued Irish Party strategy during the Ulster crisis years of 1912 to 1914, subtly arguing that Redmond's refusal to consider partition as a solution at an earlier stage of the impasse contributed to the downfall of constitutional nationalism in 1918. The striking conclusion was that the Irish Party was not entirely blameless, a form of historical revisionism notably lacking in subsequent accounts from other Redmondites, such as William O'Malley and John Valentine, who only meekly pointed to external factors in explaining the party's destruction.⁶³ The book's most controversial passage concerned the temporary partition proposals mooted on the eve of the Great War: here, Gwynn's argument unmistakably reflected more the political situation of 1919 than that of 1914. Gwynn argued that the Irish Party should have conceded Ulster unionism's demand for a permanent division in the hope that it would attract moderate opinion in the north and further the long-term cause of reconciliation within Ireland.⁶⁴ The logic of this reassessment, however, needs to be weighed against contemporary political possibilities. Gwynn's retrospective analysis has been deemed a 'serious argument, coming as it does from the pen of one of Redmond's most trusted and talented colleagues'.⁶⁵ It was, but it should not be overplayed. Gwynn's hypothetical assessment was more a reflection of his post-1916 thinking on the Ulster question than a constructive criticism of the Irish Party's policy in 1914. He was, in essence, imposing post-war politics on his reading of pre-war Ireland.

Around the time of the publication of *Redmond's last years*, Gwynn opened a correspondence with a key member of the British government's inner circle, Lloyd George's private secretary, Philip Kerr (the future Lord Lothian). Kerr was a long-standing member of the Round Table movement and a key influence on the prime minister on imperial and foreign affairs.⁶⁶ He hoped that moderate politics in Ireland could be rebuilt to accommodate a home rule settlement, thereby undermining Sinn Féin's radicalism. To this end, Gwynn reported to Kerr that the government should embark on Long's partitioned home rule scheme as the basis for a settlement: if it did so, the Lloyd George administration could expect the support of several prominent, if woefully unrepresentative, individuals, such as the Trinity College provost, J. H. Bernard, and the Maynooth scholar, Walter McDonald. Gwynn also prompted Kerr to send a copy of McDonald's new book, *Some ethical questions of peace and war*, to the prime minister, as, he claimed, it 'makes the case for partition out of Celtic history'.⁶⁷ This was a bold claim, but *Ethical questions* was an intrepid book, and the prime minister took

⁶³ William O'Malley, *Glancing back: 70 years' experiences and reminiscences of press man, sportsman and member of parliament* (London, [1933]), p. 137; John Valentine, *Irish memories* (Bristol, n.d.), p. 58.

⁶⁴ Gwynn, *Redmond's last years*, p. 103. ⁶⁵ Paul Bew, *John Redmond* (Dundalk, 1996), p. 35.

⁶⁶ John Grigg, *Lloyd George: war leader, 1916–1918* (London, 2003; first published 2002), p. 231.

⁶⁷ Gwynn to Kerr, 5 Dec. 1919, Lord Lothian papers, NAS, GD40/17/78.

Gwynn's advice. Introducing the government's partition proposals in the House of Commons, Lloyd George quoted McDonald's key argument:

The Protestants of Ulster differ from the majority in the rest of the island, not only in religion, but in race, mentality, culture generally ... A minority in Ireland, they are a majority in the north-east corner, and therefore, on the principles which we have been advocating, are entitled to home rule.⁶⁸

Through Kerr, Gwynn obtained a line of communication with the prime minister; but whether Lloyd George would always listen was another matter.

Sinn Féin ignored the government's scheme, while the Dominion League rejected it; within nationalist Ireland, Gwynn was isolated on the issue. His support for partition should not be seen as a sudden conversion to unionism, or even to a 'two nations theory'. Gwynn believed that partition could be used as the means to create the circumstances for a future unitary settlement; Ulster unionism interpreted it as an end in itself. Gwynn's stance was *realpolitik* in time of revolution, a realization that the proposals were simply the best that could be gained from the Conservative-dominated coalition. Gwynn recognized that unionist-nationalist relations were severely damaged by the pre-war home rule crisis (partly due to the Irish Party's unwillingness to concede to unionist demands); republican extremism exacerbated and entrenched Irish divisions in the post-war period. In this environment, Irish self-government was imperative to rebuild the centre ground and find a common unity of purpose amongst moderate men, north and south. In an article for the *Manchester Guardian* in January 1920, Gwynn argued – with an echo of Michael Collins's later defence of the Anglo-Irish Treaty – that the government's proposals could eventually lead to the ultimate freedom Ireland sought.⁶⁹ Gwynn desired as much legislative power as possible in Irish hands; but since a republic was an impossible dream and deeply repugnant to Ulster unionism, whilst the government's lack of interest in conceding dominion status was politically bankrupting the Dominion League, a revised form of home rule became the logical compromise. The shifts in political positions made by Gwynn through 1919 – federalism to dominion status to partition – were not due to lack of principle, but rather to a realization of the limitations of both British statesmanship and Irish nationalism.

The government's adoption of Long's scheme was accompanied by an upsurge in IRA violence. Gwynn's *Observer* column of 29 February 1920 opened with the grim pronouncement that '[t]here is now quite definitely war in Ireland'.⁷⁰ This commentary followed the IRA's decision to besiege several police barracks around the country and a reactive intensification of the British military effort. Amidst deteriorating security, the cabinet agreed to accept the Ulster unionists' preference for a six-county (rather than Long's proposed nine-county)

⁶⁸ *Hansard*, 5th series, 22 Dec. 1919, cxxiii, col. 1173; Walter McDonald, *Some ethical questions of peace and war: with special reference to Ireland* (Dublin, 1919), p. 70.

⁶⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Jan. 1920.

⁷⁰ *Observer*, 29 Feb. 1920.

arrangement for the northern administrative area of the Government of Ireland Bill, which was greeted with horror within the Dominion League.⁷¹ Gwynn had severe reservations about the partitioning of Ulster, but understood the logic of the unionist party's 'play for safety' in the face of republican violence.⁷² The crucial point for Gwynn, though, was that 'on the question of Irish unity it gets England out of the way', permitting the space for Irishmen north and south to deal constructively with each other to ensure partition would be limited in its operation.⁷³ In his diary, Plunkett sardonically recorded that Gwynn's well-publicized support for the bill was 'a great help to the Coalition Government'.⁷⁴ But Plunkett only knew half of the 'great help'. As well as his propaganda work, Gwynn was also supplying Kerr with information and advice on the Irish situation, which was incorporated into the design of the partition legislation. Aware of criticisms which the bill was attracting in Ireland, Kerr looked to Gwynn for moral support as legislative details were being addressed. Gwynn confidently informed Kerr that the bill represented the best way to secure self-government in Ireland:

Nobody likes partition. But if self-government is to be started it can be only on a dual basis ... The choice made is dictated by a desire to forward Irish unity. Irishmen are more likely to come together if dealing direct with one another and if self-government exists both in Ulster and the rest.⁷⁵

Amidst the sobering reality of Irish politics, this was an extremely optimistic view; the great handicap was the lack of domestic support for the scheme in Ireland. After Gwynn argued in *The Observer* that the Government of Ireland Bill's financial terms would benefit Ireland by lowering the imperial contribution,⁷⁶ *The Irish Statesman's* frustration boiled over:

The truth is that Captain Gwynn, who is a courageous minority of one in Southern Ireland, is so anxious that something with the name of settlement should take place that he is prepared, with pathetic eagerness, to assent to the proposition not merely that half a loaf is better than no bread, but that half a loaf is better even if it is poisoned.⁷⁷

The Irish Statesman robustly opposed the bill, claiming that its provisions were insufficient to meet the nationalist demand for meaningful self-government; partition was also regarded as an insult. Clearly, Gwynn had few allies in Ireland. While the IRA's armed campaign and Sinn Féin's political ascendancy gravely weakened moderate nationalism from 1919 to 1921, internal divisions caused by Gwynn's stance, and an inability to comprehend partition, rendered the Dominion League impotent.

The Government of Ireland Bill faced additional challenges emanating from the British government. The late spring of 1920 witnessed a dramatic shake-up of

⁷¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 5 Mar. 1920. ⁷² *Observer*, 14 Mar. 1920. ⁷³ *Irish Times*, 5 Mar. 1920.

⁷⁴ Plunkett diaries (microfilm), 5 Mar. 1920, BCL.

⁷⁵ Gwynn to Kerr, 24 Mar. [1920]. Lord Lothian papers, NAS, GD40/17/78.

⁷⁶ *Observer*, 21 Mar. 1920.

⁷⁷ *Irish Statesman*, 27 Mar. 1920.

the administration in Dublin Castle, with the arrival of the senior civil servants, Sir John Anderson, Alfred 'Andy' Cope, and Mark Sturgis, who obtained control of the Irish executive from Lord French. A clear 'carrot and stick' strategy thereafter emerged from Dublin Castle, which was a marked transformation from the confused inactivity of British policy in Ireland the previous year.⁷⁸ The mission of Anderson, Cope, and Sturgis was to extend peace feelers towards Sinn Féin; this was accompanied by the arrival in Ireland of the notorious Black and Tans and Auxiliaries to combat the IRA. As the newly appointed commander-in-chief, Sir Nevil Macready, later put it, Lloyd George wished to encourage better relations between the government and Sinn Féin whilst simultaneously making it explicit 'that a continuance of the campaign of assassination would necessitate measures more drastic than any which had been hitherto enforced'.⁷⁹ Whilst this dual strategy was not unproblematic on the ground, it also undermined the already unpopular Government of Ireland Bill, which remained on the Westminster agenda.

Gwynn tied himself further to the partition scheme by accepting the chairmanship of a small constitutional committee tasked with the unenviable challenge of suggesting amendments to make the bill more palatable to nationalist opinion. *The Irish Statesman* scathingly attacked this amendment group, which it argued threatened to convey the false impression that Irish nationalism was behind the proposals, bar several minor modifications.⁸⁰ A short-lived war of words between Gwynn and the Dominion League's Henry Harrison erupted over the pages of several newspapers. Harrison, an old Parnellite, informed *The Irish Times* that the Dominion League would have 'no truck with a bill designed to administer the *coup de grâce* to the indivisible nationhood of Ireland'.⁸¹ Gwynn conceded that the amendment group lacked the support of nationalist Ireland, but hoped to use his status to influence public opinion.⁸² The bill, he reasserted, should be taken seriously in Ireland, as it could lead to a fuller measure of freedom: working against it would undermine this ambition.⁸³

Was Gwynn warranted in adopting such a stance? The reason Harrison's criticisms of Gwynn and the Government of Ireland amendment group appeared so wounding was that they were largely justified. Irish nationalism in all its guises had long rejected the British proposal to provide Irish self-government. The Dominion League feared that Gwynn's prominence in advocating the bill would undermine any future settlement between Sinn Féin and the government, which would exceed the terms offered. Whilst the logic of the League's posturing was clear, it was also a reactionary argument, highlighting the striking inability of constitutional nationalism to present a feasible alternative settlement. The tone of League propaganda through 1920 was self-defeating, with no forthcoming

⁷⁸ Bew, 'Moderate nationalism', p. 744.

⁷⁹ Nevil Macready, *Annals of an active life* (2 vols., London, n.d.), II, p. 426.

⁸⁰ *Irish Statesman*, 8 May 1920. ⁸¹ *Irish Times*, 6 May 1920. ⁸² *Irish Independent*, 7 May 1920.

⁸³ *Manchester Guardian*, 5 May 1920.

constructive policy. For Gwynn, the counter to the Dominion League's criticisms was founded on the belief that 'the only practical alternative to the Bill is going on as we are'.⁸⁴ This was not an option for Gwynn, as he expressed in his desire to lead public opinion, rather than to reflect it. He was, however, a leader without followers.

Gwynn did try to render the bill more satisfactory to Irish nationalists. He led a deputation to meet Long at Westminster in May: amongst the amendments forwarded was an imaginative plan to establish a parliament in Ireland consisting of northern and southern bicameral legislatures, and increased financial powers, instead of the two separate entities proposed under the Government of Ireland Bill. This scheme, however, was politely rebuffed.⁸⁵ Unable to shift government thinking, and with the security situation in Ireland deteriorating rapidly during the summer of 1920, Gwynn joined the demoralized remnants of constitutional nationalism at a Dominion League-sponsored 'peace conference' in Dublin in August. This was the last throw of the dice for the League. Its newspaper, *The Irish Statesman*, had folded in June due to financial reasons, whilst the organization itself had all but expired.⁸⁶ The build-up to the peace conference was, however, more significant than the event itself, as the government markedly altered its tone in Irish policy. At the beginning of August, Lloyd George, accompanied by senior coalition politicians, met businessmen from Dublin and Cork, and constructively engaged with the idea of dominion status for Ireland.⁸⁷ Two weeks later, the prime minister made a major announcement, offering to open talks with Sinn Féin on certain conditions.⁸⁸ Categorically aimed at republicanism, these initiatives further undermined the appeal of the moderates, despite the apparent vindication of their platform.

The peace conference was held on 24 August, but failed to benefit from the momentum of Lloyd George's perceptible shift in attitude.⁸⁹ Designed as a forum to bring together a number of well-known moderate political figures – most notably, Plunkett, Harrison, and Gwynn – and (mostly southern unionist) business leaders to discuss ways and means to achieve an Irish settlement, many speakers emphasized the need for immediate self-government to defuse Ireland's troubles, with dominion status deemed the most preferential. Characteristically, Gwynn focused on divisions and their reconciliation: 'In order to get national self-government', he told the conference, 'they must get national unity', which was only achievable by a temporary division of the country. The public airing of views at the conference, however, only served to underline splits that the partition question was causing within moderate opinion, with the likes of Gwynn and the Ulster-born earl of Shaftesbury accepting the need for division of the island,

⁸⁴ *Irish Independent*, 7 May 1920. ⁸⁵ *Irish Times*, 25 May 1920. ⁸⁶ *Irish Statesman*, 19 June 1920.

⁸⁷ Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary: Ireland, 1918–1925*, ed. Keith Middlemass (3 vols., London, 1971), iii, p. 403.

⁸⁸ Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity, 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007), p. 403.

⁸⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 25 Aug. 1920.

which was strenuously opposed by Plunkett and the former Irish Party MP, Sir Thomas Esmonde.⁹⁰

The 'good feeling' reported at the peace conference held little sway within nationalist Ireland. *The Freeman's Journal*, which identified strongly with dominion status, was grudging in appraising the day's activities. 'The conference', complained an editorial column, 'avoided the most serious perils in its path.' Particular criticism was directed toward the lack of any practical outcome: no new party, no adopted formulas or schemes.⁹¹ Indeed, as the government was informed, the conference could only agree on one unanimous resolution, which called for the immediate release of Terence MacSwiney, the lord mayor of Cork and IRA commander, from Brixton Gaol.⁹² MacSwiney was one of the first republicans to be convicted under the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act of 1920, which brought most offences within the jurisdiction of courts martial, thereby significantly militarizing policing in Ireland. MacSwiney had begun a hunger-strike several days after his imprisonment, from which he died in October. The MacSwiney case was a public relations disaster for the government, as it not only antagonized almost all shades of non-unionist opinion in Ireland and Britain, but also provided a ruinous backdrop for a 'peace conference' of moderates. A deputation representing the conference interviewed a number of Dublin Castle officials at the end of August, with its agenda dominated by the potential fallouts of the hunger-striking by MacSwiney and other Cork IRA men.⁹³ In September, Lloyd George received a telegram from the peace conference 'standing committee', appealing for the release of the hunger-strikers as an 'indispensable condition' for peace and 'on the grounds of humanity'.⁹⁴ Lloyd George, however, proved implacable, and nothing more was heard from the peace conference.

III

As George Bernard Shaw later declared, '[t]error produces nothing but counter terror and terror again endlessly, like a circulating decimal'.⁹⁵ The introduction of the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries into the Irish melting pot in the summer of 1920 would have provided Shaw with a classic example of this cycle. Comprised of British ex-soldiers, the Tans were wholly inadequate for civil policing; even senior Auxiliaries were unclear whether their force was a military or policing body.⁹⁶ With the support of the 'police advisor' in Ireland, General Hugh Tudor, the Tans carried out reprisal attacks against presumed republicans, communities, and property, with disastrous consequences for wider opinion. Gwynn captured

⁹⁰ *Irish Times*, 25 Aug. 1920.

⁹¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Aug. 1920.

⁹² Jones, *Whitehall diary*, III, p. 37.

⁹³ Mark Sturgis, *The last days of Dublin Castle: the Mark Sturgis diary*, ed. Michael Hopkinson (Dublin, 1999), p. 31.

⁹⁴ *Irish Times*, 15 Sept. 1920.

⁹⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *Everybody's political what's what?* (London, 1944), p. 259.

⁹⁶ Brigadier-General F. P. Crozier, *Ireland for ever* (London, 1932), p. 94.

the fearful mood that permeated Ireland following their arrival in his book, *The Irish situation*: 'There were now two terrors in Ireland. It would be difficult to say whether the community at large was more afraid of the police or the gunmen.'⁹⁷ British reprisals made headline news in Britain with the Black and Tan 'sack' of Balbriggan, near Dublin: responding to the assassination of a RIC officer by the IRA, the Tans killed several men and destroyed a number of properties in the small town. The 'sack' made 'sensational headlines' in the British newspapers and attracted universal condemnation.⁹⁸ Writing for *The Observer* shortly afterwards, Gwynn was more circumspect. He included a section with a sub-heading 'This week's reprisals', citing Balbriggan as only one amongst others in a ghastly list, which also included incidents in Galway, Limerick, and Clare.⁹⁹ Plainly, Gwynn wanted *The Observer's* readership to understand that Balbriggan was not an isolated case.

Gwynn pressed for martial law as an alternative to police reprisals in the struggle against the IRA throughout the autumn and winter of 1920, on the grounds that such a strategy 'would be less barbarous and brutal and far less demoralizing than the present anarchic and futile campaign of revenge'.¹⁰⁰ While Gwynn argued the case for a new military policy, he was also keen to draw attention to the underlying catalyst for its need: the lack of self-government in Ireland. As the security situation deteriorated further, Gwynn wrote in November that, without the immediate grant of home rule to Ireland, 'martial law will by itself achieve nothing'.¹⁰¹ This claim was made with an eye on Westminster, where the Government of Ireland Bill was reaching the end of its legislative journey. Gwynn was unrepentant in his continued advocacy of the measure, appealing to nationalists to 'make the best and not the worst of it', after lamenting that the bill's passage through parliament was 'a fact which impresses nobody in Ireland'.¹⁰² Nationalist Ireland did not have any incentive to support the partition proposals – a point reinforced by Lloyd George's apparent conversion to the idea of dominion status.

The first elections under the terms of the Government of Ireland Act were fixed for May 1921. At the end of 1920, Gwynn complained to Lloyd George that the government was 'neglecting to advertise' the new act, a fact not unrelated to the prospects of a deal between the government and Sinn Féin.¹⁰³ In the first few months of 1921, Gwynn's *Observer* articles struck an increasingly sombre tone, as he accepted the fact that although Ireland had finally won home rule after decades of nationalist struggle, it was a pyrrhic victory, given Sinn Féin's resistance to its terms. Despite its flaws, Gwynn maintained that the new southern parliament should be supported: as he put it, 'satisfactory Home Rule will in effect have to be

⁹⁷ Stephen Gwynn, *The Irish situation* (London, 1921), pp. 84–5.

⁹⁸ D. G. Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish troubles: British public opinion and the making of Irish policy, 1918–1922* (London, 1972), pp. 52–3.

⁹⁹ *Observer*, 26 Sept. 1920.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* See also 3 Oct., 24 Oct. 1920.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7 Nov. 1920.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 14 Nov. 1920.

¹⁰³ Sturgis, *Last days*, p. 102.

won through unsatisfactory Home Rule'.¹⁰⁴ Linking the establishment of home rule in Ireland with disbandment of the hated Black and Tans was the last practical policy that Gwynn encouraged the government to adopt in a desperate move to energize moderate opinion alienated by the paramilitary policing of the crown forces. Gwynn firmly informed Kerr that the Tans must go: 'the Act cannot conceivably be worked without that riddance. With this inducement, a majority for working the Act *might* conceivably be obtained. Without it, it is ridiculous to expect it.'¹⁰⁵ As the war continued, the potential of such a move was, however, unrealized as the Tans became as much a part of the problem as the solution.

The tone of Gwynn's *Observer* column became increasingly grave throughout the spring of 1921, as he condemned the cheapening of life through the IRA's targeting of ex-servicemen and the British force's disregard for the safety of non-combatants.¹⁰⁶ Once more, Gwynn decided that it was time for action. With his focus on the May election to the new institutions created by the Government of Ireland Act, Gwynn contacted Lord Midleton – as he had done in the aftermath of the December 1918 election – to gain a hearing for a new political party.¹⁰⁷ On 5 March, Gwynn met Midleton and another southern unionist leader, Lord Oranmore and requested that they pool their combined resources. 'The time has come', Gwynn told the unionist chiefs, 'when moderate men in Ireland of various shades of religious and political belief ought to come together and organize in order to be able to put forward candidates at the coming Election for a Parliament in Southern Ireland'. Gwynn believed that the silent majority who opposed violence in Ireland would rally to this call, but what was needed was leadership. A new 'Centre Party', with Midleton at its head ('his name as leader would carry great weight') was the formula Gwynn promoted. Although Midleton listened sympathetically, he rejected the proposals, just as he had discarded Gwynn's invitation to play a leading role in the first incarnation of the Centre Party.¹⁰⁸ Deflated, Gwynn left the meeting with no organization to contest the elections. A further blow came in March when Kerr stood down as Lloyd George's private secretary, thereby severing Gwynn's informal line into the inner circle of the government. Journalism and writing were now Gwynn's only public outlets, as the last political door slammed in his face.

IV

The 1921 elections were contested by Sinn Féin, but not in support of the new institutions. The political wing of republicanism won every seat in Southern Ireland (bar four university seats) without contest, returning a new underground

¹⁰⁴ *Observer*, 6 Feb. 1921.

¹⁰⁵ Gwynn to Kerr, 11 Feb. 1921, NAS, Lord Lothian papers, GD40/17/78.

¹⁰⁶ *Observer*, 27 Feb., 20 Mar., 27 Mar. 1921.

¹⁰⁷ Gwynn to Midleton, 2 Mar. [1921], TNA, Lord Midleton papers, PRO 30/67/44/2560.

¹⁰⁸ Resumé of meeting, 5 Mar. 1921, TNA, Lord Midleton papers, PRO 30/67/44/2561-2.

Dáil and rendering the southern parliament stillborn. In Northern Ireland, Ulster unionism swept the board, winning forty of the fifty-two seats. 'All the features in the political landscape are obscured by the fog of war', Gwynn reflected. 'The elections have revealed nothing of the facts concerning "Southern Ireland" except that the present system of government is held in detestation.'¹⁰⁹ Gwynn's ideal scenario, which was framed while the Government of Ireland Bill was passing through Westminster in 1920, was that if Ireland were given institutions that respected the competing claims of self-determination on the island, moderate men would come forward and guide the northern and southern parliaments towards a unity of purpose. The realities of May 1921 were as far removed from this hope as possible.

Gwynn lamented the failure of constitutional nationalists to contest the 1921 elections, while acknowledging the climate of fear which 'deterred most voters from supporting opposition to Republicanism'.¹¹⁰ The violent background was thus, in this reading, a prominent reason in rationalizing Sinn Féin's sweep of southern Ireland, thereby nullifying Gwynn's brand of constitutional politics. What such an interpretation disregards, however, is the genuine depth of feeling within all wings of nationalism against the Government of Ireland Act, a fact that Gwynn could not overturn. Travelling through Ireland during April and May 1921, the English journalist, Wilfred Ewart, failed to find one nationalist who supported the government's plans. Instead, he repeatedly found a call for at least dominion home rule, suggesting that *pace* Sinn Féin's doctrinal republicanism, the position throughout the country at large remained fluid, if much more advanced than Gwynn's.¹¹¹ A compromise between British imperialism and Irish nationalism was possible from this vantage point, but not on the basis of the 1920 legislation.

The compromise arrived in the form of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, granted three-quarters of Ireland dominion status (to be called the Irish Free State), and maintained partition, albeit with the establishment of a boundary commission to rule on the position of the border at a later date. Sinn Féin achieved a settlement closer to the ideal of the Dominion League than that declared in the 1916 proclamation of the Irish republic, a dilution of ideology which would result in bitter civil war. Given the noises emanating from government circles through 1920 and 1921, coupled with the green-tinged pragmatism displayed by key sections of the republican leadership, the Treaty's terms are unsurprising. The crucial point is that it took Sinn Féin to negotiate the settlement and to bring public opinion with it. For all their good intentions, Gwynn and the Dominion League could not appeal to the masses in a time of revolution, despite being largely vindicated by the Treaty's terms.

Not that Gwynn was bitter. He welcomed the Treaty, and looked forward, at last, to self-government in the twenty-six counties. He staunchly supported the

¹⁰⁹ Gwynn, *Irish situation*, pp. 86–7.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹¹¹ Wilfred Ewart, *A journey in Ireland, 1921* (London, 1922), pp. 19, 42, 61, 83, 85, and 114.

first government of the Free State, greatly admiring its character in facing down the threat from the anti-Treaty IRA.¹¹² But the ironies of revolution were also apparent. Sitting in the press box during the Free State's first parliamentary meeting in 1922, Gwynn's mind wandered 'to the modest family vault in Wexford, where we left John Redmond'.¹¹³ In a home rule parliament, with Redmond as prime minister, Gwynn could have expected to play a senior role in the first Irish government since the Act of Union. Now, following the defeat of Redmondism, a new generation of Irish politicians celebrated their success in achieving self-government without acknowledging the groundwork laid by constitutional nationalism since the days of Isaac Butt. Even more distressingly for Gwynn, partition had become more entrenched by the excesses of both Irish republicanism and Ulster unionism; a further irony lay in the fact that the civil war in the south was fought over the limitations of the granted autonomy, rather than the north's position outside of it. For all of Gwynn's emphasis on the question of Ulster through 1919 to 1921, it was not the crunch issue for republicanism.

Despite the achievement of self-government, it was difficult for Gwynn to avoid speculating on what 'might have been'. In Gwynn's retrospective accounts, he came to see the Easter Rising as the tipping point in the fate of constitutional nationalism. This explained the failure of moderate politics after the Rising: the unchaining of 'old hates' in 1916 served to render impotent the conciliatory nationalism he championed.¹¹⁴ In this reading, the villain was Sinn Féin: moderate nationalism was destroyed primarily by republican myopia, albeit aided by British blunders and unionist intransigence. Nationalism's unwillingness to concede partition to Ulster unionism was the source of great turbulence in Ireland; but Gwynn's support for such a strategy – which many found abhorrent – served to divide the very forces of political moderation that he believed were crucial in hauling the country back from the chaos of revolution. The Dominion League was appalled by Gwynn's stance in relation to Ulster; yet in its public criticisms of Gwynn, the League betrayed its political bankruptcy in addressing the northern question. Within the context of revolutionary violence and Sinn Féin's political dominance, the failure of moderate politics comes into sharper focus. Divided, demoralized, and disregarded, moderate nationalism was both a master and a slave of its fate during the war of independence.

Stephen Gwynn was the foremost of the last home rule generation to play an active political role in Ireland between 1919 and 1921, and his experiences illuminate the death of the ideal of national reconciliation: Redmondism without Redmond was not to be. Despite his position on the 'losing side', Gwynn greatly enriched the debates about Ireland's future during the period under question. In establishing the Centre Party and propagating federalism, to joining the Dominion League, then supporting the government's partition scheme, Gwynn shifted positions in reaction to the inadequacies of the major political players in Ireland and Britain. His weekly *Observer* column during the revolutionary years

¹¹² *Observer*, July 1922–Apr. 1923.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 10 Dec. 1922.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4 Apr. 1926.

offered a critical account of both militant republicanism and the self-defeating nature of the harsh British reprisal campaign. It was the violence of the IRA, according to Gwynn, which entrenched the Irish divisions that partition merely reflected. Gwynn's political thought was complex, if out of tune among contemporaries. His drive to resurrect nationalist realism was violated by republican idealism: Gwynn's Ireland, based on reconciliation and a mature recognition of diverse political opinions, was lost in the chaos of revolution, and partition became its perennial epitaph. His 'revolution' is one that has been written out of the Irish story, since he voiced unpalatable views regarding Ulster and the British state to his fellow nationalists. His defeat, however, offers an implicit vindication of his efforts. Relations between, and within, the two Irelands that emerged after 1922 lacked Gwynn's conciliatory and pluralistic touch; subsequent events would reveal the damaging extent of this loss.