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What was to blame for the failure to secure home rule for Ireland in the decades before World War One?

Introduction

Within this essay we will examine the background to home rule within Ireland, the key people involved within the home rule debate and other contributing factors that affected the failure to secure home rule for Ireland in the decades prior to World War One

Background to home rule within Ireland

Home rule has, and indeed continues to be a contentious subject for the people of the island of Ireland, with effects felt in both the north and south of Ireland as well as on the British mainland.

Up until the 1800 Act of Union that created the nation state of Great Britain and Ireland, and came into effect of January 1st 1801¹, Ireland had its own parliament. However, with the passing of this act, governance was shifted to Westminster, with 100 Irish MP's being allowed to sit.

In itself, this act was met with controversy, with Henry Grattan jnr stating that the act was one of "power and corruption" and that it was illegal.² Whether the act was illegal or not may depend upon perspective, but the actuality was that the bill was passed, and the Irish parliament was abolished.

Over the following seventy years, various groups within Ireland became increasingly disillusioned with the governance that was set up as a result of the act of union being passed, which led to numerous uprisings in protest.³

This then sets the scene for those who opposed the act to look for ways to gain home rule back within Ireland. Into this, we can look to Isaac Butt, a lawyer, Queens Council, and professor at Trinity College Dublin.⁴ Although Butt was a Conservative politically, and in the early to mid 1800's engaged in debates defending the Act of Union, over time, Butt came to

¹ UK Parliament, *An Act for the Union of Great Britain and Ireland* (2022), < <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/legislativescrutiny/parliamentandireland/collections/ireland/act-of-union-1800/>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

² HistoryIreland.com, *An Act of Power & Corruption?* (2000) < <https://www.historyireland.com/an-act-of-power-corruption/>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

³ Wikipedia, *list of Irish Uprisings* (2022) < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Irish_uprisings> [accessed 18 March 2022].

⁴ HistoryIreland.com, *Isaac Butt and the founding of the Home Rule movement* (2020) < <https://www.historyireland.com/isaac-butt-and-the-founding-of-the-home-rule-movement/>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

view that governance from Westminster was not in the best interests of the Irish people, and in May of 1870 called a meeting involving Catholics, protestants, nationalists, Orange men, the Fenian Brotherhood and the Young Ireland movement to determine a route forward to change the governance of Ireland. It is generally held that this meeting created the concept of home rule within Ireland and from which the Home Rule League was founded.⁵ Although the Home Rule League was initially led by Butt, he was replaced by Charles Parnell as its leader⁶, and it is the role of Parnell that will be examined next.

Charles Parnell

Parnell was Irish born and part of the land owning aristocracy. Although educated in England, he returned to Ireland and was eventually elected as member of Parliament for Meath in 1875.⁷ Parnell established himself as a pro Irish nationalist who was happy to obstruct the workings of Westminster by making long speeches on any topic put before parliament⁸, a tactic that we could recognise as being similar to the filibuster of modern day politics. The policy did however gain him further support and recognition within Ireland. It could also be argued that the tactics of obstruction that he used may have created a feeling of alienation towards him from the British public, and Parnell himself even stated “We will never gain anything from England unless we tread on her toes”.⁹

In 1881, William Gladstone put forward a bill for land reform within Ireland. This gave Parnell scope to again demonstrate his political prowess by carefully negotiating the bill and balancing the needs and desires of the British government with the needs and desires of the land owners and tenant farmers within Ireland. One of the aims of the bill was to provide tenant farmers with land ownership and cement what was referred to in a paper by Guinnane and Miller as the three F’s or Ulster Custom.¹⁰ In theory this should have worked well for the Irish people, although in practice it’s end results are questionable as demonstrated by Guinnane and Miller with few tenant farmers being able to afford to purchase land.

This was set against a backdrop of rent strikes and social ostracising of anyone who took over a farm from which the previous tenant had been evicted, a policy that Parnell actively encouraged in a speech made in Ennis when he stated

When a man takes a farm from which another had been evicted you must shun him on the roadside when you meet him, you must shun him in the streets of the town, you must shun him in the shop, you must shun him in the fairgreen and in the marketplace, and even in the place of worship, by leaving him alone,

⁵ HistoryIreland.com, *Isaac Butt and the founding of the Home Rule movement* (2020) < <https://www.historyireland.com/isaac-butt-and-the-founding-of-the-home-rule-movement/>> [accessed 11 March 2022].

⁶ Clare County Library, *Charles Stewart Parnell* < <https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/parnell.htm>> [accessed 14 March 2022].

⁷ Britannica, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Stewart-Parnell>> [accessed 14 March 2022].

⁸ Clare County Library, *Charles Stewart Parnell* < <https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/parnell.htm>> [accessed 14 March 2022].

⁹ ThoughtCo, *Charles Stewart Parnell* < <https://www.thoughtco.com/charles-stewart-parnell-1773852>> [accessed 14 March 2022].

¹⁰ Timothy W. Guinnane and Ronald I. Miller, ‘The Limits to Land Reform: The Land Acts in Ireland, 1870-1909’, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 45.3 (1997), 591-612 (p.594).

by putting him in a moral Coventry, by isolating him from the rest of his country as if he were the leper of old, you must show your detestation of the crime he has committed.¹¹

It also led to the Land League in Ireland being declared illegal under the Coercion act of 1881, which ultimately led to the arrest of Parnell as the league's president.¹² The coercion act itself, passed by the Liberal government of Gladstone could be seen as a very divisive law in that it removed the right to trial by jury and allowed for a person to be arrested without being charged by removing habeas corpus¹³, and may have increased feelings of dissatisfaction in the way that Ireland was being governed from Westminster.

Both the act itself and the arrest and imprisonment of Parnell could also be argued were mistakes by the sitting government. The imprisonment and eventual release two years later of Parnell had it would appear, the effect of further elevating the status of Parnell within the eyes of the nationalist movement that was pushing for home rule.

It could also be argued that by agreeing to stop support of the rent strikes in what became known as the Kilmainham Treaty, Parnell brought together different aspects of the nationalist movement such that the Westminster government was then better placed to be able to deliver a successful home rule bill.

The counterpoint to all of Parnell's political successes is the failure within his personal life that ultimately led to his downfall.

In his private life, Parnell was engaged in an affair with Katherine O'Shea, the wife of Capt. William O'Shea with whom his release from jail had been negotiated. At the time of the negotiation, Capt. O'Shea was not aware of the affair between his wife and Parnell, although it had been ongoing for two years.¹⁴ It has been argued that some members in the Irish Nationalist movement were aware of the Parnell's relationship with a married woman but chose to ignore it on the grounds of it being an attempt to wreck home rule for Ireland.¹⁵

However, in 1889 Capt. O'Shea filed for divorce and named Parnell as the corespondant, a divorce petition that went uncontested.¹⁶ Although the divorce case may not have affected Parnell initially, his marriage to Katherine O'Shea two years later would. This marriage would create issues for the Catholics within the nationalist movement as it would have run contrary to Catholic teachings on divorce and adultery, thus setting Parnell up to appear as morally unfit to be leading the political party aiming to achieve home rule for Ireland, which ultimately led to the loss of his political prowess.

William Gladstone

¹¹ Clare County Library, *Charles Stewart Parnell* < <https://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/parnell.htm> > [accessed 14 March 2022].

¹² TheIrishHistory.com, *Trampling the rights of a free people: Coercion in Nineteenth century Ireland* (2019) < <https://www.theirishstory.com/2019/04/26/trampling-the-rights-of-a-free-people-coercion-in-nineteenth-century-ireland/#.Yi86jHrP3IU> > [accessed 14 March 2022].

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Britannica, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Stewart-Parnell> > [accessed 14 March 2022].

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

William Gladstone was the Liberal Prime Minister who on two separate occasions tried to introduce home rule bills. He first came to power as Prime Minister between 1868 and 1874 although during this period Gladstone did not attempt to introduce a home rule bill. Indeed, even during the period of his second cabinet, from 1880-1885, Gladstone did not attempt to introduce a home rule bill.¹⁷ It was not until his third period as Prime Minister which started in February of 1886 that this was attempted.¹⁸ As we have already seen in our examination of Parnell, Gladstone had introduced land reform acts for Ireland which, dependent upon perspective, may or may not be considered wholly successful and indeed had a long interest in the politics of Ireland.

However, it was not until During Gladstone's third stint as Prime Minister in 1886, that he introduced a home rule bill for Ireland, which was defeated in the commons and ultimately caused Gladstone to resign.¹⁹ However, what must be taken into consideration with this defeat is that Gladstone's Liberal government held the same number of seats as the opposition and so relied upon support from other parties. It is also possible to add into this a backdrop of Conservative dislike of Gladstone's Liberals. Gladstone himself had stated his parliamentary career as a Conservative in 1832, as MP for Newark before eventually becoming leader of the Liberals in 1867.²⁰ Although there were splits within the Conservative party itself²¹, Lord Randolph Churchill who was leading a more breakaway faction of the Conservatives, had already stated in 1883 that "We must loose India, we must lose our colonies and still remain a great power, but if we lose Ireland, we are lost"²², and then went further in 1884 by stating that an alliance between Gladstone and Parnell would be a "monstrous and dangerous coalition".²³ From this it is possible to understand that a government that did not have an overall majority within the commons, and would need to rely upon support from other parties, would have a difficult time passing any legislation that might be considered contentious. This failure to get a home rule bill passed led Gladstone to call a general election that he subsequently lost.²⁴ This general election defeat led to a Conservative government. Of perhaps greater significance was that the Parnell had decided to join forces with the Conservatives at this time and had issued a "vote Tory manifesto", After not getting the responses that he wanted from Gladstone.²⁵ Parnell's ploy was also in part due to Churchill leading Parnell to believe that the Conservatives would oppose coercion,

¹⁷ Britannica, *William Ewart Gladstone* (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Ewart-Gladstone>> [accessed 14 March 2022].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ GOV.UK, *William Ewart Gladstone* < <https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers/william-ewart-gladstone>> [accessed 16 March 2022].

²¹ Britannica, *Lord Randolph Churchill* (2022) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lord-Randolph-Churchill-British-politician>> [accessed 16 March 2022].

²² Paul Bew, 'The Parnell-Churchill Nexus', in *Uncertain Futures: Essays about the Irish Past for Roy Foster*, ed. by Senia Paseta (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2016).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Paliment.uk, *Two Home Rule Bills* (2022) < <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/legislative scrutiny/parliamentandireland/overview/two-home-rule-bills/>> [accessed 16 March 2022].

²⁵ Britannica, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Stewart-Parnell>> [accessed 16 March 2022].

something that they ultimately did not do.²⁶ Whether Parnell's ploy was a sensible political move or not is debateable. However, it becomes a null point although the fact that Parnell then joined forces again with Gladstone's Liberals to bring down the Conservative government and force yet another general election would suggest that Parnell may have viewed it as a mistake. This general election returned Gladstone to power for a fourth time.²⁷

It was during this fourth administration that Gladstone had a second attempt at introducing a home rule bill. Parliament.uk notes that the introduction of this second bill was "fiercely contested at every stage", and that it was "only ruthless application of the Parliamentary timetable" that allowed for Gladstone to force it through the commons".²⁸ It could be argued from this that Gladstone was doing everything possible to get a home rule bill for Ireland passed. However, this second bill was defeated in the house of Lords with what at the time was the largest defeat recorded of 419 votes to 41.²⁹

If we accept that Gladstone was making all possible efforts to get the home rule bill passed into law, we must then look at why there was such opposition to the bill. We have already seen that there was fundamental opposition to the bill from the Conservatives, and it is possible with the aid of conjecture to believe that this may be because Gladstone had previously been a Tory but was now leading a Liberal Government.

However, it has also been suggested that Gladstone made mistakes on how he approached the governance of Ireland and home rule.

Within the book *Uncertain Futures: Essays about the Irish Past for Roy Foster*, Marie-Louise Jennings suggests several areas where Gladstone's personal failings in relation to Ireland may have limited the ability to get a home rule bill passed. Jennings notes that Gladstone was an avid reader, with his diary indicating that he read nearly 800 books relating to Ireland over the course of seventy years.³⁰ She further notes that after the failure of his first attempt to get a home rule bill passed that "his Irish reading reached a peak of eighty titles".³¹

It would be easy to assume from this that Gladstone had a large and intimate knowledge of the problems within Ireland. However, Jennings further notes that Gladstone's opinions about Ireland were based on "a foundation of reading about the past and not on relevant contemporary literature".³² It could be argued that this useful but ultimately somewhat limited retrospective viewpoint may have led also limited Gladstone's understanding and thus ability to get the home rule bill passed. It was further noted that Gladstone disliked reading newspapers and did not take much interest in the Irish press, which again may have

²⁶ Britannica, *Lord Randolph Churchill* (2022) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lord-Randolph-Churchill-British-politician> > [accessed 16 March 2022].

²⁷ Britannica, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Stewart-Parnell> > [accessed 16 March 2022].

²⁸ Parliament.uk, *Two Home Rule Bills* (2022) < <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/legislative scrutiny/parliamentandireland/overview/two-home-rule-bills/> > [accessed 16 March 2022].

²⁹ Britannica, *William Ewart Gladstone* (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Ewart-Gladstone> > [accessed 16 March 2022].

³⁰ Marie-Louise Jennings, 'Gladstone and Ireland: The Perils of the Intellectual', in *Uncertain Futures: Essays about the Irish Past for Roy Foster*, ed. by Senia Paseta (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2016).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

reinforced his views based on historical accounts rather than current accounts of what was actually happening within Ireland. It is possible as well that this lack of interest within the Irish press may have limited his ability to foster good relations with more moderate Irish nationalists who may in turn have been able to help Gladstone get a home rule bill passed. This lack of contact with moderates within Ireland was reinforced with Gladstone's limited contact with people when he did eventually visit Ireland in person. Although a trip to Ireland was originally planned to take place in 1845, it was not until 1877 that Gladstone actually visited, and even then, his visit was limited to Dublin Castle and five houses owned by Ascendancy landlords.³³

The final thing to note from Jennings' writing is that Gladstone ultimately could not persuade others in parliament that his home rule bills were the right thing to do. We have already hypothesized that this may in part have been due to Gladstone starting his political life as a Tory before becoming a Liberal Prime Minister. However, Jennings notes that Gladstone had "difficult personal relationships with his political colleagues", and that his colleagues would describe both written and verbal as being "opaque".³⁴ It is perhaps this opacity in communication that became a contributing factor in Gladstone's inability to persuade others in Parliament to back the home rule bills that he put forward. Indeed, Jennings concludes her writing by stating:

The nature and extent of his reading and the missed opportunities to make contact with the heirs of O'Connell, coupled with his own personality and the problems he had in his relationship with his colleagues, were all material factors in his failure to achieve his goals.³⁵

Conclusions

It can be seen that there is not a single cause for the failure to get a home rule bill for Ireland onto the statute books. Instead it can be viewed as a series of contributing factors, none of which on their own may have led to a home rule bill not getting passed through parliament, but when combined created a situation where there was sufficient doubt, mistrust, and self interest from other parties and people involved, that the initial two attempts to enact a home rule bill failed.

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³³ Marie-Louise Jennings, 'Gladstone and Ireland: The Perils of the Intellectual', in *Uncertain Futures: Essays about the Irish Past for Roy Foster*, ed. by Senia Paseta (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2016).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

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