10. Commentary

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The two preceding chapters, one general and speculative, the other highly specific, give rise to the same reflection: how attempts at defining constitutional relations between England and Ireland and Scotland focus attention on inconsistencies and anomalies in British political thought and practice, which is not constructed to reflect or contain those supposedly peripheral dimensions. Thus the contributions focus on what has been called "the question of a British cultural and political identity", and whether such a thing exists.

Reading Dr. Asch's paper on the Irish Ascendancy (chapter 7) one is reminded of a definition of "nation" by an eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish theorist: "If we understand [by "nation"] a compass of wall, or an extent of land: our notions are too narrow, and too material. We must understand by it that system of law and polity by which we are kept together in peace and order, and preserved in security from our enemies and ourselves. And this is the civil sense of the word."[1] This, of course, was the strategy whereby the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish could conveniently define themselves as "the Irish Nation". But it may be worth interpreting in other ways, too, for modern purposes, and I'll come back to this at the end.

Meanwhile Professor Harvie has shown us a "nation" in nineteenth-century Scotland constituted by the institutions of its intelligentsia, much as prescribed by that Anglo-Irish formula. Like the Anglo-Irish, too, the Scots supplied the English institutions of Empire with their personnel, who found their way through the interstices of the class-bound English system. It might be pointed out that by the nineteenth century, the Irish were doing this, too - and not just the Anglo-Irish. The middle-class Irish Catholic "lad o'pairts"

[1] E. MAURICE, A Sermon preached in Christ-Church, Dublin, on Thursday the 23rd of October, 1755, being the anniversary of the Irish Rebellion, Dublin 1755.

existed, too, and his influence penetrated the English worlds of journalism and the law.[2] Ms. Krumwiede's generalizations about stereotypes and antipathies held by the English concerning the Irish are easily made, but they ignore a number of ambiguities, intersections and overlaps in the histories of the two countries under the Union; and ignore also the fact that anti-Irish prejudice in Britain had, as I see it, more to do with class than with race. The question of national "attitudes" and notions of "national character" need a more complex analytical framework than that employed by commentators like Curtis, Lebow, Cairns or Richards.

Another intersection that comes to mind is the intellectual one between Ireland and Scotland in the early eighteenth century, regarding the Scottish Enlightenment: besides correcting Buckle, Professor Harvie might note the contributions of Irish Protestant thought and teaching, coming via Hutcheson and Glasgow. This was an intellectual tradition foreign to England in every sense, and subsequently exported (with interest) to America.

In a sense, Ms. Krumwiede's paper deals with that covenanting, volunteering culture in its late, unintellectual stage: the crisis before the First World War when the question of the relationship between periphery and core became focussed on the issue of Home Rule and its extension to Ulster. The Union, its repeal or rationalization, was now on the table; and it had become a shibboleth, an object either of blanket denunciation or myopic veneration. What was more necessary than ever was a constitutionally imaginative approach, and this is what 1910-1914 did not deliver. It is tempting, therefore, to ask - what else might have happened? Counterfactual history is, quite properly, much out of favour nowadays; but to raise might-have-been questions is one way of clarifying what was at issue. What if there had been no war? But matters were already deadlock, and a Liberal government was

[2] Trollope's *Phineas Finn* novels show us an Irish Catholic of Gaelic descent scaling the heights of politics and grand society in the 1860s.

not going to un-block them (except by imposing partition which I'll return to). What if Ulster had been faced down by the government employing force? But the Curragh incident removed that option, by clarifying that the army could not be relied upon to do so. Was there room for recovery after the war began - since the war effort was supposed to infuse all the constituents of the United Kingdom with a common sense of Britishness? This was probably Redmond's strategy, but it misfired after his Woodenbridge speech pledging the Volunteers to fight wherever the firing-line extended, not just in defence of Irish soil.

In a sense, all these might-have-beens are vitiated by the Liberal government's policy of drift between 1910 and 1914; a final speculation might concern what would have happened if the Irish Chief Secretary, Augustin Birrell, had not been incapacitated from 1912. He understood the culture of Irish nationalism, and argued early on for a tough legalistic line to be taken with Carson and the Ulstermen. But in this period decisions about Ireland were reappropriated by the centre - and particularly by Lloyd George - rather than by those on the spot. This, too, is a recurrent pattern in times of crisis throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And yet, having done so, the government gave away the initiative all the time. Home Rule had only advanced on to the agenda as a function of British political conditions and Redmond's ability to exploit the situation; the ensuing crisis was dictated by Carson's ability to impose the structure of action on a passive government.

None the less, Ms. Krumwiede perhaps underestimates the extent to which senior Liberals, of the Gladstonian tradition, were committed to Home Rule for Ireland; though they were also committed to non-coercion. And the influence of Morley, Lewis Harcourt and Grey gave way to that of Churchill and Lloyd George. At the same time, one is increasingly struck by the inadequacy and subjectivity of the information on which the government relied to make their decisions: random reports from arbitrarily - chosen sources, hearsay, wishful thinking, hopeful ignorance. For our part, we tend

to rely on heroic memories which make us assume that some sort of explosion was the only possible way of breaking the impasse.

It is worth, though, remembering that most people up to late 1912 at any rate, and possibly until 1914, thought and talked in terms of a Home Rule future. This is equally true for Irish extremists like Patrick Pearse and cultural revivalists like Douglas Hyde and W. B. Yeats. And that is one reason why disappointment was so intense when it became evident that Ulster would not go into a Home Rule Ireland without civil war. By 1914 Asquith had prepared the way for an exclusion option - the lesser option, of Home Rule within Home Rule, had been more or less ruled out in favour of partition. It remains an open question how far he had deliberately brought about this situation.

The situation as it developed illuminates several implicit contradictions which have relevance to other aspects of United Kingdom relationships, too. For one thing, the rhetorics used by the Irish and the British were strikingly different. The Irish used a rhetoric of exclusive nationality, the British spoke the language of inclusive imperialism. This was one reason why Home-Rule-all-Round would not work. There was always an implicit tension between the language used by the Irish, necessarily nationalistic in order to square the circle between the various factions behind Redmond, and the imperial claims used by Asquith to soothe his own followers and spike the guns of the opposition. (This had not been the case when Home Rule originated, in the early 1870s, because at that stage it owed as much to the example of Canada, and a call for efficient economic administration in Ireland, as to the inspiration of the Fenian ideal.) Thus a dangerous double-think developed, as politicians tried to reconcile Irish demands into a more moderate total package. Hence, too, the concentration on issues like representation and finance, as the Home Rule Bill was drafted, rather than confronting questions of sovereignty and Ulster's resistance. This gave the opposition a chance to push the argument ruthlessly to its limit.

And this, too, allowed the initiative to be dominated by those politicians who had already flirted with coalition in 1910; thus Churchill and Lloyd George already had lines open to F. E. Smith, Carson's chief ally, and used this connection to try and get off the Ulster hook in 1912. This was done, interestingly, via a Scottish intermediary - the Unionist journalist Kitchin of the *Glasgow Herald*. Another Scottish connection recurred when Churchill flew a kite at Dundee in October 1912, suggesting the so-called "heptarchy" of regional assemblies all over. But by the end of that month, conversations with Bonar Law had put the partition of 4 or 6 Ulster counties on the table as the inevitable route to be followed. This effectively cut out Birrell, and also put the Irish Parliamentary Party in an impossible position *vis-à-vis* the extremists at home.

Ms. Krumwiede correctly says that the tone of Gaelic revivalism and extreme nationalism had become more sectarian and exclusivist by this stage; but it remains an interesting question exactly when the cultural radicals became political revolutionaries. Even in Pearse's case, this seems to have happened at a very late stage; probably not until 1912-1913 at the earliest. Many other believed in a constitutional resolution until 1914. The traditional view of an inevitable drift to physical-force revolution from Parnell's death in 1891 leaves out the microwave-effect of the First World War, as well as the record of the Liberal politicians between 1910 and 1914. The Irish Republican Brotherhood, if revived in certain areas, remained a tiny organization until 1912. None the less, it is true that the Irish Parliamentary Party was losing touch with the youth-vote; the age-profile of the party and its organization demonstrates as much. But Sinn Fein might have taken over from them without an armed rising, if only by forming the opposition in a Home Rule Parliament.

This is counter-factual speculation again. But as Ms. Krumwiede's paper emphasizes, Redmond banked heavily on being the voice of constitutionalism; Carson, the opposite. It was a reversal of traditional positions. Until the war, Ulstermen were seen as focussing all the characteristics of excessive,

irrational aggression associated with the Irish. But when war broke out, those very qualities became (in the Ulster Brigade) the subject of sentimental imperial eulogies. Without this, would Carson have got away with it?

Finally one recurs to the open question: what would have been the ways out? The obvious one concerns coercion of Ulster, but the government consistently evaded this possibility, even when the information they were receiving about Ulster's militarization was reliable and specific. (Haldane was one of the very few who argued for force early on, but at the War Office he had to give way to the incompetent Seely.) Birrell's suggestion that Carson be prosecuted was ignored by the Cabinet. Inaction meant that the threats presented by the military leaders at the Curragh set the terms, and allowed them to claim a government "plot to coerce Ulster": there was never any such thing, just a belated recognition of how serious potential Ulster resistance might be. But Seely's ineptitude revealed that the government was not prepared to impose Home Rule on Ulster by force. On the political front, in March 1914, Unionist rejection of Lloyd George's exclusion option forced the government to go ahead with the original Bill, leaving it open to wrecking amendments. The war froze a situation which had run into impasse.

The only other way out was to accept partition early on. It was suggested in the private correspondence of Cabinet members at least as early as August 1911. But the Ulster question was sidelined in all the early discussions over Home Rule; much as generals always fight the previous war over again, politicians remembered 1886 and 1893, expected representation and finance to be the rocks on which the measure might come to grief, and concentrated their course accordingly. This had another effect on the Ulster position: for the complex financial arrangements foisted on the government by Samuel in 1912 meant that Ulster could not be easily excluded without wrecking the whole structure. Again, the government gave up necessary room for manoeuvre. Asquith claimed in September 1913 that he had always known some special deal must be arranged for Ulster, but he certainly kept it quiet.

The third way out really raises a fundamental theme of this collection of essays. We have seen, in the crisis of 1910-1914, a demonic combination of bad luck, bad timing and bad judgement. But that, as Yeats wrote, is nothing new. In the end, we focus on national and imperial assumptions, cherished separately, that turned out to be inconsistent and implicitly contradictory. What we never see is a different approach to sovereignty: the need for constitutional imaginativeness which I mentioned earlier. Dr. Morrill emphasizes in his paper the "poverty of the English language" to cope with these differences. There is also a great poverty of conceptual imagination. What if allegiance had been conceived of in a different way: as more linked to persons than to territories; as more optional than imposed; as linked to peoples rather than to "a compass of wall or an extent of land", in that eighteenth-century formulation I mentioned at the beginning? This is probably as anachronistic an imposition, for 1912, as de Valera's idea of an "externally associated" Republic attached to the Commonwealth was in 1921. But it is worth, perhaps, concluding by pointing out that the limited language and apparatus of constitutional initiatives taken at a political level seem incapable of addressing questions of cultural difference and cultural community; and these questions, however ambiguous and anomalous, continue to dominate the history we have inherited.