**BALLYMONEY MEETING 24 OCTOBER 1913**

**‘PROTESTANTS AGAINST CARSONISM’**

Public Talk and launch of pamphlet on the significance of the 1913 Alternative Covenant and the role of progressive Protestantism  
**Speakers:** Rev. David Frazer and Bill O'Brien.   
Wednesday 3rd October, 7pm   
Belvedere Hotel, Denmark Street, Dublin.

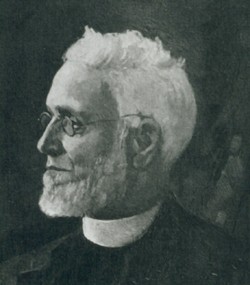
The 28th September 2012 will be the centenary of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant against Home Rule. Far less well known is the ‘Alternative Ulster Covenant’, signed in October 1913 by some twelve thousand Protestants [some give a lower figure of 3000 but the documentation is gone from QUB's Henry collection according to Eamon Phoenix] from County Antrim in support of Home Rule and against partition.

The Counter Covenant was written by Rev JB Armour and Roger Casement.   
It read: "Being convinced in our conscience that Home Rule will not be disastrous to the national well-being of Ulster, and that, moreover, the responsibility of self-government would strengthen the popular forces in other provinces, would pave the way to a civil and religious freedom, which we do not now possess, and would give scope for a spirit of citizenship, we, in whose names are underwritten, Irish citizens, Protestants, and loyal supporters of Irish Nationality, relying under God on the proven good feelings and democratic instincts in our fellow-countrymen of other creeds, hereby pledge ourselves to stand by one another and our country in the troubled days that are before us and more especially to help one another when our liberties are threatened by any non-statutory body that may be set up in Ulster or elsewhere. We intend to abide by the just laws of the lawful Parliament of Ireland until such time as it may prove itself hostile to democracy. In sure confidence that God will stand by those who stand by the people, irrespective of class or creed, we hereunto subscribe our names.”  
  
Whilst the numbers who signed the Alternative Covenant do pale in comparison with the numbers who signed Carson’s Covenant, its very existence does call into question the myth of a Protestant Ulster undivided in its loyalty to the Crown and as one in its opposition to Irish nationalism and self-determination.   
  
A historical pamphlet discussing not only the Alternative Covenant but also what James Connolly predicted would be a ‘carnival of reaction’, north and south.   
  
All Welcome

**The 1913 Alternative Ulster Covenant**

* [antrim](http://www.indymedia.ie/newswire/antrim) | [history and heritage](http://www.indymedia.ie/newswire/historyandheritage) | [opinion/analysis](http://www.indymedia.ie/newswire/opinionanalysis) authorWednesday September 26, 2012 14:02author by J Keeganauthor email [indyjoe at mail dot com](mailto:indyjoe%20at%20mail%20dot%20com)

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The Alternative Covenant was written by Rev JB Armour and Roger Casement.   
  
A Public Talk on the Alternative Covenant will be held on 3rd October in the Belvedere Hotel, Denmark Street, Dublin, at 7pm. Speakers to include Rev David Frazer and Bill O'Brien. All Welcome. (See <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/102491> )  
  
A historical pamphlet discussing not only the Alternative Covenant but also what James Connolly predicted would be a ‘carnival of reaction’, north and south, will be launched on the night.

[](http://www.indymedia.ie/attachments/sep2012/jbarmour_1.jpg)  
Rev. JB Armour

The Alternative Ulster Covenant   
  
On the 24th of October 1913, a public meeting titled ‘Protestants against Carsonism’ was held in Ballymoney Town Hall, Co. Antrim. The meeting was called by Rev J. B. Armour, minister of the local Trinity Presbyterian Church and a liberal Home Ruler. Armour was an outspoken critic of the politics of Edward Carson, his Ulster Volunteer Force and the 1912 Ulster Covenant. The town of Ballymoney was chosen as the meeting place because the district had a radical Republican tradition going back to the United Irishmen in the 1790s. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was also the hotbed of tenant rights agitation among the Protestant tenant farmer population.   
  
Over five hundred people attended the meeting, which overflowed from the hall onto the street outside. Mottos on the walls proclaimed ‘Ulster for Ireland and Ireland for Ulster’. Those attending included representatives of all social classes. Rev. Armour wanted to demonstrate the level of strong opposition to partition and sectarian politics that existed among Irish Protestants; for this reason the meeting was a Protestant one and Catholics were specifically asked not to attend.   
  
Two resolutions were passed. The first resolution rejected the claim of Carson to speak for Ulster’s Protestants and it pledged its signatories to lawful resistance to Carson’s activities. The second resolution was put before the meeting by Roger Casement. A British consul from Ballymena, Casement had gained international acclaim for his exposure of the exploitation of native peoples in the Congo and the Putumayo River region in Peru.   
  
Casement’s resolution read: “That this meeting dispute the narrow claim that differences of creed necessarily separate Irishmen and women into hostile camps, affirms its belief that joint public service is the best means of allaying dissensions and promoting patriotism, and calls upon his Majesty's Government to pursue the policy of bringing all Irish men together in one common field of national effort.”   
  
This resolution was passed unanimously. Various contributions from the floor expressed anger at the thought of the division of Ulster and the exclusion of three of her nine counties. It was argued that if they accepted Home Rule, Irish Protestants would have at least one quarter of the membership of any Dublin parliament to protect them and to look after their interests. Partition, however, would bring about two sectarian states, where the major denomination in each would have too much power and would dominate religious minorities. Religious division rather than cooperation would become the order of the day. Others at the meeting suggested that partition would have a severe negative impact on the economy of Ulster and of Ireland as a whole. Further industrialisation would become difficult and Ulster’s natural farming communities would be divided from each other.   
  
Casement remarked: ‘I have no wish to add to the tensions of the day. I am seeking only to point a way, not to conflict and further embitterment of feeling, but to a peace with honour; a peace for Ireland as a whole and honour for Ulster as the first province of Ireland.’   
  
He went on: ‘Ulstermen have been sold by political trickery, arming and drilling against the perceived enemy. The enemy they are been led against, is no enemy at all: Catholic Ireland, Nationalist Ireland, desires not triumph over Ulster, they seek only friendship and goodwill.’   
Casement appealed to the spirit of 1798, when Irish Catholics and Protestants had fought together for an independent Republic.   
  
Mrs. Alice Stopford Green spoke next. Daughter of the Church of Ireland Archdeacon of Meath and granddaughter of the Bishop of Meath, she declared that she was present for the honour of the Protestant faith. She reminded the largely Presbyterian audience that both Irish Presbyterians and Catholics had historically been discriminated against by an Anglican, aristocratic ascendancy, and that both had been bond together in the struggle for political and social rights. The future of all Irish Protestants and Catholics lay together, not apart. She touched her audience deeply when she made reference to the Land League: ‘the Protestant farmers of Ulster owe their present prosperity to the legislation obtained by Southern sacrifice’.   
  
Captain Jack White also spoke. White was the son of a British general and himself a soldier, but his experience in the Boer war would turn him into a strong opponent of British imperialism. White declared that their common Christian faith held each man to be a son of God. ‘But let Protestants remember this: the test of their sonship of God is their brotherhood with man, and those Protestants who think and act towards their Catholic fellow-countrymen as though they were their hereditary enemies had better, for their own sakes, leave the name Protestantism and God out of the question’. This declaration was met with cheering and prolonged applause.   
  
White proposed a counter covenant to that of Carson’s. The counter covenant read:   
“Being convinced in our conscience that Home Rule will not be disastrous to the national well-being of Ulster, and that, moreover, the responsibility of self-government would strengthen the popular forces in other provinces, would pave the way to a civil and religious freedom, which we do not now possess, and would give scope for a spirit of citizenship, we, in whose names are underwritten, Irish citizens, Protestants, and loyal supporters of Irish Nationality, relying under God on the proven good feelings and democratic instincts in our fellow-countrymen of other creeds, hereby pledge ourselves to stand by one another and our country in the troubled days that are before us and more especially to help one another when our liberties are threatened by any non-statutory body that may be set up in Ulster or elsewhere. We intend to abide by the just laws of the lawful Parliament of Ireland until such time as it may prove itself hostile to democracy. In sure confidence that God will stand by those who stand by the people, irrespective of class or creed, we hereunto subscribe our names.”   
  
After the meeting the Alternative Covenant was distributed and efforts were made to get a large number of Protestants in the county to sign. It is claimed that twelve thousand people signed the Alternative Covenant. Copies of the signatories were reported to be among Jack White's papers when he died. Unfortunately, White’s family, who did not share his views, made a bonfire of his papers immediately after his funeral.   
The speeches of the three main speakers were subsequently published in a pamphlet entitled ‘A Protestant Protest.’  
  
After the Ballymoney meeting, a deputation went to meet the British Prime Minister Asquith on the 26th November 1913. The deputation was a mixture of businesspeople, trade unionists and academics, such as Professor Henry of Queens University Belfast, David Campbell of the Belfast Trade Council and Alex Wilson. The deputation emphasised to Asquith that those who were organising the Ulster Volunteer Force, an illegal militia established to resist Home Rule by force, were for the most part landlords, their tenants and their dependants. These paramilitaries did not speak for the Protestants of Ulster.   
  
Rev. JB Armour was quite vocal in dismissing Carson’s ‘Ulster Day’, the day of the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant, as ‘Protestant fool’s day’. He publicly denounced Carson, the Unionist leader, as ‘a sheer mountebank’ and ‘the greatest enemy of Protestantism’. He even wrote that Carson ought to be tarred and feathered!   
  
A public platform party against partition was formed. Its forty or so public representatives were distinguished Protestants, such as J. Goold-Verschoyle, Robert Carson, James Hanna, Rev JB Armour, WD. Hamilton and JL. Taggart. Also a member was Alec Wilson, the son of one of the directors of the great ship-building firms Harland and Wolff. Interestingly, Harland and Wolf expressed an indication at the time that they were opposed to partition and that they supported Home Rule.   
  
Unhappily, the Ballymoney meeting was a once-off and any activity that sprung from it failed to turn the tide of Carsonism. Carson and his followers in the Unionist Party and the UVF rose to popular power in Ulster in a wave of anti-catholic sentiment. The result was the British-imposed partition of Ireland. However, the Ballymoney meeting did show that a significant minority of Protestants in North-East Ulster were opposed to partition.   
  
At the Ballymoney meeting Roger Casement emphasised the links between ‘the Catholics of Wexford and the Presbyterians of Antrim who had fought together on the same side little more than a hundred years previously’. He said the ‘Protestant Dissenters of Ulster’ had played a very progressive role in Irish history, and what a wonderful contribution they could make to an all-Ireland state. He hoped that Catholics and Protestants would unite and that they would ‘set the Antrim hills ablaze’.   
  
Unfortunately, this was not to be.

The Irish Times - Thursday, September 27, 2012

**How Ulster Covenant put the gun into Irish politics**

BRIAN M WALKER

**OPINION:** The signatories of the 1912 pledge vowed to support their cause by using all ‘necessary’ means. Their actions were fatally flawed  
ON SEPTEMBER 28th, 1912, a number of my family members signed the Ulster Covenant. Indeed, my great grandfather’s cousin, John Lonsdale, was a leading figure in the whole proceedings.  
He was MP for Mid Armagh, secretary of the unionist parliamentary party and later leader of the party from 1916 to 1918, when Edward Carson joined the war cabinet.  
Nonetheless, in retrospect, and with all the benefit of hindsight, I believe that their actions were fatally flawed. Unintentionally, a part of this document had fatal consequences in Ireland not only for unionism and loyalism but also for nationalism and republicanism.  
The words of the Ulster Covenant explain why Ulster unionists were so opposed to home rule. They viewed it as “subversive” of their “civil and religious freedom” and believed it would have disastrous economic and social consequences. They saw the Bill as part of a conspiracy, whereby the government had agreed to it following a deal with nationalists to keep the liberals in power.  
In my view, these arguments are reasonable from a unionist perspective.  
The purpose of Ulster Day on September 28th, 1912 was to show how nearly half a million Ulster unionists were firmly opposed to home rule for Ireland.  
However, the covenant contained a phrase that would take the unionist protest into new and potentially dangerous territory.  
The document declared that those who signed it pledged to support their cause by “using all means which may be found necessary”. What was meant by this statement was not elaborated upon.  
For most unionists on Ulster Day, September 28th, the matter seems to have raised little concern or questioning, perhaps because the exact words of the covenant were not released until just over a week before the signing.  
When my grandfather, Carlisle Walker, put his name to the covenant in Carnmoney, East Antrim, I have no idea what he thought he was signing up to. On the same day, however, a few miles away in Carrickfergus, in a brave and very perceptive sermon, the rector, Rev Frederick MacNeice, explained why he could not sign the covenant.  
Much later, his son, the poet Louis MacNeice, claimed that his father was a home ruler. In fact, as David Fitzpatrick has shown in his brilliant new biography of the father, Frederick MacNeice was an ardent unionist, but an all-Ireland unionist, and he was very concerned about possible consequences of the covenant for relations within Ireland.  
In his sermon, MacNeice acknowledged that the covenant could be seen in different ways. Some believed that the use of force was justified to defend the unionist position, others felt that a threat of force would help avert violence, while others saw the document as simply a protest against home rule. His view, however, was that it could lead to bitterness, violence and even civil war, and, as a Christian, he could not condone such a policy. The words of MacNeice, ignored by most of his parishioners, proved prophetic, although even he could not have appreciated the particular train of events that ensued.  
In January 1913, the Ulster Volunteer Force was established to support the unionist cause and eventually consisted of 100,000 men, all of whom had signed the Ulster Covenant and who were now organised along military lines. In April 1914, 35,000 rifles were brought in to arm the UVF.  
These actions had not gone unnoticed in nationalist circles. In response, in November 1913 the Irish Volunteers were established and eventually more than 160,000 men signed up. In May 1914, 1,500 guns were imported into Ireland for the Irish Volunteers. By the summer of 1914, with the political situation unresolved and with the country full of armed “volunteers”, civil war was a real possibility.  
In the end, this did not happen because of the outbreak of the first World War. Both the unionist and nationalist leaders promised their support to the British war effort. Most Irish Volunteers accepted this position but a small number did not. This group, led by some republicans, staged an armed rising in Dublin at Easter 1916.  
These later events can be linked to the Ulster Covenant. By sanctioning the threat to use “all means”, the covenant, as Michael McDowell recently argued in Belfast, opened the door for a counter physical-force tradition, and was an unintended “foundation document” for Irish separatism. It gave a special invitation and opportunity for “those Irish separatists who would countenance the use of physical force”.  
It is possible to claim that the Ulster Covenant served to protect the interests of Ulster unionists in the six counties of what became Northern Ireland. At the same time it helped to justify the threat or use of force which led to the rise of armed resistance and Irish separatism in the rest of Ireland. In this way the covenant was damaging in the long run for unionists, not least for their supporters in the new Irish State. Within Northern Ireland the early years would be marked by violence.  
While the decision to sanction the threat of force or the use of force in 1912 had damaging consequences for unionists in the long run, the response by nationalists and republicans was also very detrimental to their cause in the end. The decision to meet the unionist challenge of armed opposition by similarly adopting the threat or use of force led eventually to the 1916 Easter Rising, the War of Independence and then the Anglo-Irish Treaty.  
No doubt, for many republicans and nationalists this outcome was to their liking. However, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was followed, inevitably, by terrible civil war. Because the “gun” was now at the centre of Irish politics, it meant that people resorted to violence to settle their differences over the Treaty. During the War of Independence, hundreds of Irish people were killed, but during the Civil War the figures of those killed, by other Irish people, were in their thousands. No one could have forecast these outcomes. Frederick MacNeice, however, understood that violence begets violence.  
Few in Ireland in 1912, unionist or nationalist, were willing to listen to his words.  
  
  
**Brian M Walker is emeritus professor of Irish studies at Queen’s University Belfast and author of A Political History of the Two Irelands: from Partition to Peace**