FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

*Friends in High Places: Ulster’s resistance to Irish Home Rule, 1912-14*

by Alan F. Parkinson

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On the eve of the centenary of perhaps the most significant event in Ulster during these two years – the signing of Ulster’s Solemn League and Covenant – Friends in High Places: Ulster's resistance to Irish Home Rule, 1912-14 tells the story of Ulster’s organised resistance to the Third Home Rule Bill, and in particular assesses the nature and degree of success of unionists’ political and propaganda campaigns.

The island of Ireland was on the cusp of Home Rule towards the end of the Edwardian period. Only the determined opposition of Ulster unionists and their allies in Great Britain prevented this from occurring. Loyalists exhibited genuine feelings of besiegement and isolation between1912 and 1914 and many observers believed Ireland was, by the summer of 1914, on the verge of civil war.

The central focus of Friends in High Places is the vital interdependence of Ulster unionists and the British establishment during the late Edwardian period. It analyses the true nature of this relationship and also examines the significance of key events during these crucial years of Ulster’s resistance to Irish Home Rule. With its timely publication in 2012, this book is a must-read for those with an interest in this pivotal period of early twentieth-century Irish political history.`

Friends in High Places

By Dr Alan Parkinson

The sense of identity of the mass of Ulster Unionists just before the Great War has acquired an iconic, almost mythical status.  Yet it is important that any serious study of political and community tensions in Ulster a century ago should explore the mindset of the Protestant population at a time of increasing polarization in Ireland over Home Rule. While the bulk of Ulster and Irish Catholics supported John Redmond’s demand for limited Home Rule within the Empire, Carson and Craig threatened to use force against the Liberal Government in order to avert this ‘nefarious conspiracy against a free people’, as Carson put it in 1911. Behind them stood Bonar Law and the British Conservative establishment who saw Ireland as the key to preserving the Empire. It was the ready support of Unionist allies at Westminster, in the Army and among the aristocracy that forced Asquith to consider partition as a compromise solution by 1914.

    The ‘Ulster Crisis’ of 1912-14 marks the first of the long ‘Decade of Anniversaries’ which will focus government and public attention over the forthcoming decade or so. If the peoples of  this island are to come to terms with their past, and if the two communities in Northern Ireland are to achieve ‘a shared future’, based on mutual respect, it is essential that there is a shared understanding of the formative historical events of  1912-22 which have shaped the destiny of both parts of Ireland down to modern times.   In this regard, a wider understanding of the attitudes and philosophies underpinning loyalist opposition to Home Rule should encourage people today to reflect more critically on the evolution of modern unionism and the parts played by Carson, Craig, Bonar Law and the 1913 UVF.

The changing fortunes of constitutional Nationalism in response to the threat of partition and the impact of the UVF on Irish Nationalism is reflected in the rise of the Irish Volunteers in 1913 and the planning of the 1916 Rising which took both Britain and Ireland by surprise.

This talk concentrates on a period when the people of Ulster arguably came closest to being engulfed in a sectarian civil war, a conflict perhaps only averted by the outbreak of World War One in 1914. As the Ulster-born historian, FSL Lyons has written: ‘To understand the past is to cease to live in it’. It is clear that an informed understanding of the traumatic events of a century ago can contribute to mutual understanding between the two traditions. It also has the potential to produce a new and cross-community cohesion in Northern Ireland in contrast to the sectarian polarisation of the past.

 Central to the Third Home Rule crisis is the besiegement and sense of isolation of a people. Indeed, while my lecture will focus on the fears of Ulster Protestants at that time, it will also consider the isolation of northern nationalists and their fear of being marooned in a ‘Protestant state’. A century on, it seems essential to prevent a similar sense of alienation afflicting any section of the community in the post-conflict Northern Ireland.

THE ULSTER UNIONIST-TORY ALLIANCE & COVENANT DAY [1912]

Introduction

This September marks the centenary of the signing of Ulster’s Solemn League and Covenant. The Covenant, which was the most memorable moment of Ulster Unionists’ two year resistance campaign against Herbert Asquith’s Third Irish Home Rule Bill, encapsulated the rationale behind the virulent opposition of the Province’s Protestant community to the proposed legislation. Whilst it was Ulster loyalists’ obdurate determination in resisting Home Rule which would prove to be the crucial factor in staving off unity, the numerous pledges of support and sympathy emanating from the ‘great and good’ in the rest of the United Kingdom provided considerable sustenance for Ulster Unionists during many tense moments over these two years. These ‘friends in high places’ and ‘Covenant Day 1912’ are at the heart of both my talk today and my forthcoming book, ‘Friends in High Places-Ulster’s Resistance to Irish Home Rule, 1912-14’.

Friends in High Places

Support for Ulster came from most sections of the British Establishment, including the Conservative Party, the aristocracy, press ‘barons’ and army officers. Ulster Unionists received immeasurable political backing from the top rungs of the Conservative Party, both in Parliament and in their extra-parliamentary protestations. Andrew Bonar Law, the relatively new Tory leader, had strong Ulster family connections and assured a large gathering of British and Irish Unionists at Blenheim Palace in July 1912 that he could ‘imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster can go in which I would not be prepared to support them.’ Undoubtedly Bonar Law’s support for Ulster Unionists [and indeed, that of many other Tories]was genuine. They sympathised with Ireland’s ‘patriotic minority’ whose devotion to ideals such as the sanctity of the United Kingdom and British Empire they shared. However, political pragmatism was also a factor in explaining the ‘marriage’ of the Conservative and Irish Unionist Parties, just as it was for the alliance between Liberals and Irish Nationalists. Indeed, Ireland was perceived to be a potential vote-winning issue for the Tories.

Additional parliamentary support came from the huge majority of Tory-leaning peers in the House of Lords, who also gave their backing to Ulster’s Protestants in the form of pressure group activity and extra-parliamentary protest against the impending Home Rule legislation. Organisations such as Lord Willoughby de Broke’s British League for the Support of Ulster and the Union and Lord Alfred Milner’s British Covenant movement provided much-needed practical support [in particular, financial backing and patronage of Ulster’s cause, especially important in an age of class deference], notably in the latter stages of the anti- Home Rule campaign. The BLSUU was unambiguous in its contempt towards any compromise [such as exclusion of part of Ulster], preferring the destruction of the Bill for all of Ireland, and many of its branches formed euphemistically-titled ‘athletic clubs’! Milner’s group collected nearly two million signatures for a British Covenant, and he also organised a ‘monster’ meeting in support of Ulster at London’s Hyde Park in April 1914. Even the King, George V, would express concerns that his constitutional position might be compromised and that his military might have to intervene in a civil war situation in Ulster. George V eventually called a conference in July 1914, but this Buckingham Palace meeting of key Irish and British political leaders was doomed to failure.

Further support for the predicament of Ulster Unionists was provided by sympathetic newspaper editors and press ‘barons’ such as J.L. Garvin and Alfred Harmsworth. Supportive leading articles, detailed, on-the-spot reports and cartoons lampooning unionism’s opponents featured in a range of right-leaning papers and journals including the ‘Times’, ‘Daily Telegraph’, ‘Pall Mall Gazette’ and ‘Daily Express’. Harmsworth [later created Lord Northcliffe] never wavered in his support for Carson and the ‘Times’ and ‘Daily Mail’ encouraged their respectively influential and vast readerships to empathise with Ulster’s vulnerable Protestant community. Garvin, who edited both the ‘Observer’ and ‘Pall Mall Gazette’, personally covered many of the great occasions of the Ulster Unionists’ campaign, including Covenant Day, where he admired the ‘concentrated will and courage’ of the Ulstermen.

Covenant Day in Belfast, 1912

The early morning of Saturday, 28th September 1912 was unusually quiet. Workers had been granted a half day’s leave and ‘not the sound of a hammer’ was heard in Belfast’s shipyards or factories. Supporters of Edward Carson swopped their labouring clothes for Sunday suits and Orange sashes, before making their way to the city’s new municipal headquarters. After a solemn service at the Ulster Hall, where prayers were offered requesting God’s ‘protection’ and ‘deliverance’, Edward Carson walked the short distance to the City Hall, where he was motioned by civic leaders to a circular table draped by a large Union Jack. In a moment of high drama, Carson deliberately paused to look at the mass of camera-men, before signing the most significant political petition in Britain since the Chartist documents nearly 70 years before. The single paragraph Covenant pledge stressed the religious, political and economic repercussions of Home Rule and although it was generally regarded as a defensive document, it ominously contained the phrase ‘using all our means’ which hinted of more sinister protestation against Home Rule in the near future.

Massive crowds cheered Carson’s departure from the City Hall and also later that day from the city’s dockside district. Across the length and breadth of Ulster, enthusiasm for the Covenant matched that in Belfast, with many thousands of agricultural workers suspending their harvest preparations to fulfil their Covenant obligations. It was estimated that close to half a million men and women had signed the Covenant and although this did not deter the Government from its Home Rule intentions, the Covenant campaign had clearly transmitted a powerful message of Unionist dissent and anger.

*Dr Alan Parkinson , former Senior Lecturer in History at London Southbank University, is the author of several books including ‘Belfast’s Unholy War-the Twenties’ Troubles’, ‘1972 and the Ulster Troubles’ and his latest work, ‘Friends in High Places-Ulster’s Resistance to Irish Home Rule 1912-14’, is scheduled to be published by the Ulster Historical Foundation in May.*

***His lecture will take place in the Ulster Museum on Wednesday. 14 March at 7pm***