

Sir Edward Carson, the man who partitioned Ireland

No less a person than Winston Churchill once observed “A nation that forgets its past is doomed to repeat it.” Though it is highly unlikely that Churchill was thinking of Ireland when he made this statement, no better example of the perils of forgetting the lessons of history exists. This is particularly true as regard the current peace process in Northern Ireland.



*Sir Edward Carson,
the man who
partitioned Ireland
and creator of the
Ulster Volunteer
Force*

a growing Irish Catholic middle class. More importantly, the growing power of the nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party under its leader John Redmond had been successful were on the verge of securing the passage of legislation that would result in the restoration of an independent Irish Parliament and ‘Home Rule’ for Ireland. The first steps to a peaceful restoration of self-government of Ireland by the Irish seemed to be within reach.

However, a major impediment remained: the Unionists of Ulster in the north. Emboldened and empowered by successive British governments playing the “orange card” for political advantage back in Westminster, they now turned on their creators. On 28 September 1912, using language designed to invoke images of a previous document that resulted in the 17th century English Civil War, over five thousand men signed “The Solomon League and Covenant” pledging to defy any constitutional imposition of Irish Home Rule by all means possible. The number would later grow to over 471,000. Among the signers were Members of Parliament, Military, Police and even the writer Rudyard Kipling. Their leader was Member of Parliament Sir Edward Carson, former Solicitor General of Britain. Remarkably while proclaiming ‘loyalty’, constitutionalism and religious liberty, the signers of the covenant were threatening treason and violence.

On New Years Day 1913, Carson put forth an amendment to exclude all nine counties of Ulster from any Home Rule measure. To give teeth to his measure, Carson then organized the 100,000 man Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) to resist by force any attempts to impose a united Ireland version of home rule. Though the “Crimes Act” and various other pieces of legislation that had

been previously used to crush Irish Nationalist organization still existed, they were never brought to bear against the UVF.

When the government received intelligence in March 1914 that the UVF was going to raid military depots for arms, it attempted to send troops from the Curragh garrison in Kidare to provide additional protection for the armories in Ulster. The response from Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Paget was ‘he didn’t think it justifiable’; a British General was engaging in insubordination and ignoring an order. As if this was not outrageous enough, on March 21, 1914 sixty officers of the Curragh garrison stated they would resign rather than obey the orders of the civilian government. In short the respected and professional British Army was in mutiny, backed by their commander-in-chief General Haig. The British government quickly backed down.

Fears of the UVF raiding Army Armories were unfounded however; the UVF would take a more direct approach. On the eve of the first World War, the UVF approached Britain’s enemy in the upcoming conflict, Imperial Germany. The result was “Operation Lion”, where two ships, the Fanny and the Clyde Valley delivered on April 24th 1914 24,600 rifles and four million rounds of ammunition at Larne in County Antrim. Despite the massive problems of moving such a quantity of arms, it all went off smoothly. Despite the need for scores of vehicles having to traverse several checkpoints with contraband weapons, not a single car was stopped. Among those watching the operation from the docks was Member of Parliament and future Prime Minister Bonar Law. Field Marshal Lord Roberts on hearing of the operation called it “Magnificent...it was a piece of organization that any army in Europe would be proud of.” Lord Robert’s pride was justifiable; this act of arms trafficking with a hostile Germany was in no small part organized by officers and former officers of his command.

No one could sum up the situation regarding the UVF better than Sir Edward Carson himself. Carson, the former Crown Prosecutor ironically observed “...the (UVF) are illegal and the Government know they are illegal, and the government dare not interfere with them...Don’t be afraid of illegalities.” With those words Carson, his UVF and a British government enfeebled by undermining collusion by its MPs and Army wrote the epitaph to the formation of a Home Ruled Ireland by peaceful constitutional means. With an armed UVF, Redmond and the Irish Nationalists had no choice but to form an armed body themselves; the Irish Volunteers, who would rise during Easter 1916 followed by violence and a partitioning of Ireland.

In 1998 the Good Friday agreement once again offered the hope of a peaceful transition to self determination for the Irish of Ulster. However, on 22 October 2009, several witnesses testified

before the U.S. House of Representatives about collusion by the Royal Ulster Constabulary to shield the UVF involvement in several murders. John Finucane, whose father was a victim of UVF violence stated “If the British government is serious about resolving the situation in Northern Ireland for good and building a lasting peace, then all we ask is this one simple thing: they cannot give me back my father; the least they can do is tell me the truth”. Will the British Government this time take a stand and end collusion? “A nation that forgets its past is doomed to repeat it.”

Did you Know that....

- In order to redress the balance of power upset by the landing of guns for the UVF at Larne, a similar operation was conceived by Nationalists to arm the Irish Volunteers. Erskine Childers, himself an Anglo-Irish Protestant, his wife and several friends organize the shipment of 900 rifles using Childers yacht, The Asgard, that were landed at Howth. However, unlike the Larne Landing, the British Army had no hesitation in intervening to attempt to stop the shipment. While only seizing three guns, three people were killed and thirty two were injured (one subsequently dying of bayonet wounds).

- While the Home Rule passed, implementation was suspended with the outbreak of WW I. Both the UVF and the Irish Volunteers raised troops for the British War effort. In both cases the women of the respective communities created flags for the respective divisions. However once again prejudice raised its head. While the 36th Division formed by members of the UVF was allowed to call itself the “Ulster Division” and carry its flags, the 16th Division, formed by Irish Nationalists Volunteers, had its Green flags with the ancient symbol of Ireland, the harp, confiscated and was banned in using “Ireland” in its title.ade were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Three of the Irish Brigades Commanding Officers fell in battle.

- In February 1886, Lord Randolph Churchill, father of Winston Churchill, came to Belfast ‘to play the Orange card’ in an effort to unseat the Liberal government of Prime Minister Gladstone and bring his Tory party to power. Seizing on Gladstone’s home rule bill, Churchill coined the phrase ‘Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right’. After whipping up tensions for his own political ends, Churchill left Northern Ireland after inciting some of the worst sectarian violence ever recorded.