Irish Baptists and the Second Home Rule Crisis

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Irish Baptists have historically adopted the view that religion and politics should not be mixed. The Home Rule Crisis of the late nineteenth century, and the Second Home Rule Bill in particular, put this view to the test. The prospect of Home Rule and the fear of domination by the Catholic majority under the influence of the papacy forced them to respond. Baptists, who had for so long been on the fringes of religious and political life in Ireland, now found themselves drawn into a broad Protestant front in an attempt to resist Home Rule. It also revealed that despite their attempts to maintain their distinctiveness from other Protestant denominations they shared exactly the same concerns.

Keywords

Irish Baptists; Home Rule; Gladstone; Ireland

Introduction

In September 1893, T.R. Warner gave his presidential address at the annual meeting of the Irish Baptist Association in Belfast. Referring to the erection of four new chapels, the opening of a nursing home for elderly ladies and the seventy to eighty young men being educated in the recently established Baptist Training Institute, he remarked: 'We have much to be thankful for in what may be looked upon as an epoch-making year in the history of the Baptist cause in Ireland.'[1] The rest of his address was spent defending distinctive Baptist principles, such as baptism, and attacking other denominations. It was a typical mix of late Victorian evangelical confidence and the insecurities of a small denomination in the minority Protestant community in Ireland. Other reports of the year's work at the annual meeting similarly celebrated the progress of the work in Ireland.

What is striking about Warner's address, and the other reports, is the complete absence of any reference to the issue of Home Rule. The Government of Ireland Bill 1893, commonly referred to as the Second Home Rule Bill, had been defeated in the House of Lords less than two weeks prior to the start of the annual meeting. The passage of the bill had been the major issue in British and Irish political life throughout the year. It had caused deep consternation for Irish Baptists, prompting a denomination that usually

[1] Irish Baptist Association, 'Our Position and Practice', *The Irish Baptist Magazine*, XVII (1893), p. 189.

sought to eschew politics, to become involved in the great matter of the day. When the crisis passed it seems that they immediately dropped their overt political interest.

This article will trace the background to the Second Home Rule Bill. It will examine the reasons why Irish Baptists were opposed to it, the tensions that it created, and how they responded to it.

The Background to the Second Home Rule Bill

On 1 January 1801 the Acts of Union carried by the Irish and British Parliaments came into force. With the passing of these acts the Irish Parliament, which had been in existence since the thirteenth century, was dissolved and Ireland was now governed by the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The Acts were initially welcomed by Irish Catholics who hoped that the grievances they had suffered at the hands of the Protestant Ascendancy would now be addressed. Protestants[2] feared that their political influence would be greatly diminished. However, it became clear in the early years of the century that the hopes of Irish Catholics would not materialise and that Protestants had little to fear as their grip on Irish society remained firm. As a result, agitation by Catholics for the removal of the various disabilities that they still laboured under increased. Most notably the Catholic Emancipation movement, under the leadership of Daniel O'Connell, led to the 1829 Catholic Relief Act which changed the status of Irish Catholics in society. It did so by repealing the 1672 Test Act and the remaining penal laws, while it enfranchised a limited number of land-owning Catholics and allowed them to sit in Parliament.

Following the success of emancipation, O'Connell founded the Repeal Association to seek the reversal of the Acts of Union and give Ireland legislative independence once more. Enthusiasm for repeal tended to ebb and flow in Ireland and there was no appetite for it among British politicians in Parliament. When the repeal of the Union campaign collapsed in the 1840s many in both Britain and Ireland thought that the matter was finally settled. Indeed, in the coming years, despite the ravages of the famine, Ireland seemed to benefit from its union with Britain and some of its grievances were addressed. The Irish Church Act of 1869, introduced by the Liberal Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone, disestablished the Church of Ireland and removed the burden of the tithe rent charge from all non-Anglicans. Then in 1881 Gladstone introduced the Land Act which responded to some of the

[2] The term Protestant in early nineteenth-century Ireland generally applied to members of the Church of Ireland and only later in the century came to be applied more commonly to include other denominations.

ongoing concerns of Irish tenants. Gladstone and the Liberals believed that these two acts in particular had dealt with the great issues in Ireland.

From the 1870s, however, there was a growing movement in support of Home Rule for Ireland which, despite the government's actions, continued to gain momentum. This impetus took a radical direction under the influence of Charles Stewart Parnell, who became leader of the newly formed Irish Parliamentary Party. The charismatic Parnell took an aggressive approach and became associated with a policy of obstructionism in the House of Commons, agrarian outrages in Ireland and, at best, a seemingly ambivalent relationship with the violent Fenian movement. While Home Rule was not a hugely popular idea in England there was, nonetheless, a growing sense among some Liberals that it was a necessary consequence of their commitment to democracy. In their view, as Eugenio Biagini writes,

> the legitimacy of Parliament itself depended on popular support and if the latter were to be permanently withdrawn, the former would collapse and government degenerate into despotism. This was the case in Ireland: the Union had to be amended because the overwhelming majority of the people rejected it.[3]

In late 1885, as the minority Conservative government teetered on the brink of collapse, Gladstone saw the opportunity to regain power for the Liberal Party with the help of Parnell's followers. In December that year he gave his first intimation that he would support Home Rule with the 'Hawarden Kite'.[4] In February 1886 Gladstone once again became Prime Minister but with Parnell's party holding the balance of power in Parliament. The reason for Gladstone's seemingly sudden conversion to support Home Rule has been much discussed by historians, with some seeing it as a matter of pragmatism and others a matter of principle. Since, as Vincent Comerford notes, 'Gladstone was adept at infusing what was politically expedient with his gigantic sense of moral obligation'[5] it may in fact be difficult to separate principle from pragmatism in his reasoning. Whatever his precise motivations this abrupt shift to supporting Home Rule sent shockwaves throughout Britain and Ireland. Even Gladstone's own party had largely been kept in the dark over this matter, and his support for it spilt the Liberal Party and forced them from power.

In April 1886 Gladstone introduced the Government of Ireland Bill, commonly referred to as the First Home Rule Bill, to the House of Commons. It was debated for two months and voted upon in June. The bill was defeated as ninety-three Liberal MPs voted against it. Gladstone was

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[3] Eugenio F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism 1876–1906* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 51.

[4] Gladstone used his son Herbert to 'fly a kite', i.e. to brief the press about his father's conversion to Home Rule in order to test public reaction. Hawarden Castle was Gladstone's home at the time.

[5] R.V. Comerford, 'The Parnell Era, 1883–91', in *A New History of Ireland, Volume VI: Ireland Under the Union, II: 1870-1921,* ed. by W. E. Vaughan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 53-80 (p. 63).

forced to dissolve Parliament and call a general election. The election brought the Conservatives to power and kept the Liberals out of government for the next six years. With a Conservative government Home Rule was no longer on the political agenda, although agitation for it continued, especially amongst Irish MPs. The Liberal Party was re-elected in 1892 but, once again, it was reliant upon the Irish Parliamentary Party for support. In February 1893 Gladstone introduced the Second Home Rule Bill. Unlike the first bill, success in the Commons now seemed likely due to the support of Irish MPs.

The Response of British and Irish Nonconformists to Home Rule

British Nonconformists had long venerated Gladstone and saw in him the champion for their cause. They shared in the great sense of shock at his sudden conversion to Home Rule for, as David Bebbington points out, they 'regarded the maintenance of the Union with Ireland as a matter beyond discussion'.[6] Some responded to this conversion by urging caution. *The Baptist Magazine*, for example, warned of the dangers that Home Rule would pose to the Protestant minority in Ireland. It also had a warning about putting too much faith in Gladstone and 'the folly of having political popes'.[7] On the whole, however, British Nonconformists were won over quickly to supporting Home Rule and 'were clearly overwhelmingly in its favour'.[8] This was in part due to Gladstone's moral rhetoric in supporting it. John Clifford, one of the leading English Baptists of the age who became a supporter of Home Rule, remarked after hearing Gladstone on the subject that he 'felt he was witnessing a fight for righteousness, for humanity, for God'.[9] The Nonconformist response was also in part a reaction to the policy of coercion in Ireland adopted by the Conservative government, which led some of them to see in the Irish as 'a [fellow] subject Race'[10] who shared their repression. Indeed, they were 'puzzled'[11] by what they regarded as the sectarianism of the Irish Protestants in rejecting the measure.

Irish Nonconformists, who revered Gladstone, were also astonished by his sudden change of heart and that of their English counterparts. This sense of shock arose for a number of reasons. First of all, as noted above, Home Rule was a matter that previously was not mentioned among Nonconformists. As one Congregationalist wrote, it was 'so distinctly

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[6] David Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 84.
[7] Quoted in Biagini, *British Democracy*, p. 76.
[8] Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, p. 85.
[9] Quoted in Biagini, *British Democracy*, p. 81.
[10] Quoted in Biagini, *British Democracy*, p. 72.
[11] Biagini, *British Democracy*, p. 77.

tabooed […] that Englishmen could not allow it even to be discussed'.[12] Secondly, it was a long-standing belief among English and Irish Protestants that Ireland's problems were due to the enslavement of the Irish people by the Roman Catholic Church. As Irene Whelan has pointed out there was 'a fully developed political doctrine rooted in the belief that the source of Ireland's social and political problems was the Catholic religion and that the country would never be prosperous and developed until Catholicism and all its influences were eradicated'.[13] One English Baptist visitor to Ireland in 1813 typically lamented with regard to Catholicism that 'a person must visit Ireland and witness in some sort the prevalence of this abomination, to know how completely the consciences and whole souls of the population are under the dominion of a bigoted priesthood'.[14] The idea that political power would be handed over to the Catholic majority in Ireland seemed to ignore the source of Ireland's problems and place the country in grave danger.

Thirdly, Gladstone had previously subscribed to the dangers of papal influence. In 1874 he had published a pamphlet called *The Vatican Decrees in their Bearing on Civil Allegiance*. This was a response to the declaration of papal infallibility in 1870 and it accused the Pope of 'tyranny' and 'despotism'. It showed both the widespread strength of feeling on this issue and Gladstone's popularity that the pamphlet was his bestselling work and went through 110 editions.[15] Now it seemed that Gladstone had turned his back upon this idea. Fourthly, the Home Rule movement had, since the 1870s, blurred 'the distinctions between the constitutional and physical force traditions'[16] in Irish politics. Gladstone's protégé Lord Frederick Cavendish, the newly appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland, had been murdered in Phoenix Park as recently as 1882. Now it seemed to Irish Protestants that Gladstone was turning his back on law and order and succumbing to the threat of violence.

Irish Baptists had traditionally taken the historical Baptist view of the separation of church and state, while affirming their loyalty to the Crown. They also viewed their chief aim as evangelism and therefore they did not engage in politics. The advent of Home Rule, however, tested this position. In June 1886, just three weeks after the failure of the First Home Rule Bill,

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[12] Quoted in Biagini, p. 76.
[13] Irene Whelan, 'The Stigma of Souperism' in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. by Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), pp. 135-154 (p. 136).
[14] Quoted in Joseph Belcher, *The Baptist Irish Society; its origin, history, and prospects: with an outline of the ecclesiastical history of Ireland, and a lecture, enforcing its claims on the sympathy and efforts of Christians in England* (London: The Baptist Irish Society, 1845), p. 2.
[15] See David Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 228-230.
[16] Alvin Jackson, 'The Origins, Politics and Culture of Irish Unionism, C.1880–1916' in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, Vol. 4, ed. by Thomas Bartlett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 86-116 (p. 104).

the newly installed president of the Irish Baptist Association, John Douglas, gave his inaugural address. He took the opportunity to express Irish Baptist concerns and reiterated what they considered to be the source of Ireland's troubles. He stated that '*to the influence of Rome* must be traced by far the greater proportion of those social disorders which have gained for this portion of the United Kingdom a unique and unenviable notoriety'. He continued, 'I maintain that any solution of the Irish Questions which ignores the disturbing influence of Rome, loses sight of the most important element of the problem and, is inevitably doomed to failure.'[17]

The previous month Douglas had also been appointed the editor of *The Irish Baptist Magazine* and, in a subsequent issue, he set out his vision for the magazine promising that it would offer 'notes on current events'[18] by which he meant Home Rule. His promise to comment on current events did not meet with universal approval among Baptists, many of whom still remained reluctant to mix religion and politics. As a result, he was forced to defend this approach in the magazine. He did so on the basis that there were great political questions where 'the religious and political elements are inseparably blended'.[19] This was the tension for Irish Baptists, whether they should maintain their historic policy of political silence or speak out on the great matter of the day.

Having been caught out by Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule and by the first bill in 1886, Unionist opposition became more organised. As Alvin Jackson notes, 'drawing upon a formidable range of social, financial and cultural resources […] Irish unionism brought together different traditions of Protestantism, drawing in particular upon unifying evangelical and loyalist sub-cultures from the eighteenth century'.[20] Protestant churches played a key role in Unionist resistance. Andrew Holmes points out that throughout Ireland 'all Protestant churches were against Home Rule and only a very small minority of individual Protestants were in favour'.[21] Indeed, evangelicalism provided an 'internal binding agent within Irish Protestantism'[22] by helping to unite the movement across social and denominational boundaries, as well as providing a religious rationale for resisting Home Rule.

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[17] 'The Mission of the Irish Baptist Churches', *The Irish Baptist Magazine*, July 1886, pp. 101,102. Italics original. For a time, volume numbers disappear from the pages of the magazine before being reinstated.
[18] 'To Our Readers', *The Irish Baptist Magazine*, August 1886, p. 114.
[19] 'Our Relation to Politics', *The Irish Baptist Magazine*, XII, No.1, January 1888, p .9.
[20] Jackson, 'The Origins, Politics and Culture', pp. 89, 90.
[21] Andrew R. Holmes, 'Protestantism in the Nineteenth Century: Revival and Crisis' in *The Cambridge History of Ireland,* Vol. 3, ed. by James Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 331-352 (p.348).
[22] Jackson, 'Origins, Politics and Culture', p. 93.

In an address opposing Home Rule presented to the Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury in 1888, it was noted that there were 990 Nonconformist ministers in Ireland of whom 864 had signed the address. Only eight had declared themselves to be Home Rulers. Those who declined to sign were reluctant to mix politics and religion.[23] Among those who presented the address was the Scot Archibald McCaig, pastor of Brannockstown Baptist Church, who represented Irish Baptists.[24] It was a sign that Irish Baptists were being increasingly drawn into a pan-Protestant front. Home Rule was forcing them to move beyond their traditional reticence to engage in politics. This is seen in their participation in the Ulster Convention.

The Ulster Convention met on 17 June 1892 and was an attempt by its organisers to show the unity, strength and breadth of Protestant opposition to Home Rule. It was attended by 12,000 delegates, with a crowd estimated at ten times that size outside the venue. The nature of the occasion was captured by the fact that there were speakers from all the Protestant denominations. As the *Belfast Newsletter* reported, 'Strong Liberals and staunch Conservatives are side by side; Episcopalian and Presbyterian, Methodist and Unitarian, Baptist and Congregationalist, and not least in earnestness loyal Roman Catholics.'[25] The Dublin-based *Evening Herald* noted that the resolutions adopted by the Convention had been 'signed by chief officers of the Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Congregational Churches in Ireland'.[26] Opponents of Home Rule argued in the press that this cross-denominational support was evidence that the Unionist movement was not possessed of any sectarian spirit.

Archibald McCaig, who had succeeded Douglas as editor of *The Irish Baptist Magazine,* continued his predecessor's policy of commenting on 'current events' and noted that 'we were glad to see that at the Ulster Convention our esteemed friend Dr. Usher worthily represented the Irish Baptists, and delivered a manly and impressive speech in opposition to Home Rule'.[27] Usher claimed in his speech, 'I have the support of nearly all the Baptist ministers in Ireland, and even the practically unanimous voice of Baptist church members and congregations.'[28]

McCaig's report also reflected other ways that Irish Baptists were trying to influence their British counterparts. He stated: 'We also note with

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[23] The Irish Unionist Alliance, *Facts of Radical Misgovernment; And the Home Rule Question Down to Date* (Dublin: The Irish Unionist Alliance, 1909).
[24] *The Spectator*, 17 November 1888, p. 2. In 1886 McCaig had published *Reasons Why Nonconformists should Oppose Home Rule*, which was directed at a British audience.
[25] *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 June 1892, p. 6.
[26] *Evening Herald*, 8 June 1892, p. 2.
[27] 'Irish Baptists and Home Rule', *The Irish Baptist Magazine*, XVI, No.7, July 1892, p. 148.
[28] *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 June 1892, p. 7.

pleasure that Pastor R.H. Carson, as the oldest Baptist minister in Ireland, has written a powerful letter to *The Baptist*, on the same lines, which we trust will not be without effect.'[29] He went on to praise the editor of *The Baptist* 'for his outspoken articles against Home Rule'. This was in clear opposition to John Clifford, who had become particularly associated with Baptist support for Home Rule and had, in the *Baptist Union Magazine,* clamoured for 'Justice to Ireland'.

The Second Home Rule Bill was passed in the House of Commons in February 1893. Irish Baptists were stirred to respond still further as the prospect of Home Rule now seemed to move towards becoming a reality.

The Irish Baptist Case

McCaig, who by 1893 had moved to London to become a tutor at Spurgeon's College, now sought to further rally support and wrote to all the Irish Baptist churches asking them to express their opinions. He collated the responses in the April 1893 edition of *The Irish Baptist Magazine* and added his own editorial comment.[30] He published, at least in part, responses from the twenty-seven associated churches. Among the responses he included a large section of a letter written by Hugh D. Brown, pastor of the Harcourt Street Baptist Church in Dublin, to the *Irish Times*, written on St Patrick's Day and published on 18 March 1893. Such was Brown's standing amongst Irish Baptists and the wider evangelical community in Ireland and Britain that the newspaper took Brown's letter as representing the position of the whole denomination and commented that 'the Irish Baptists have now added their testimony to that of other Churches against the Bill'.[31] That McCaig chose to print such a lengthy section of Brown's letter suggests that he also considered Brown as giving the most important and eloquent expression of Irish Baptist views.

The published comments representing the churches, along with those of McCaig and two retired pastors, offer an insight into Irish Baptist objections to the introduction to Home Rule. The fact that only two churches[32] refused to comment on the grounds that religion and politics

[29] 'Irish Baptists and Home Rule', 1892, p. 148.
[30] 'Irish Baptists and Home Rule', *The Irish Baptist Magazine*, XVII, No.4, April 1893, pp 70-78.
[31] *Irish Times*, 18 March 1893, pp. 4, 5. Brown no doubt contributed to this assumption when he signed his letter 'Pastor of Harcourt Street Baptist Church, Chairman Irish Baptist Home Mission, President Irish Baptist Training Institute, &c.' Although, as Thompson notes, his own particular solution to the 'Irish Question' that suggested a greater degree of independence for Ireland in the future was out of step with the views of the majority of Baptists, especially in the north. McCaig omitted the more controversial sections of the letter from the magazine. See Joshua Thompson, 'Baptists in Ireland 1792-1922: A Dimension of Protestant Dissent' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1988), p. 268.
[32] These were the churches in Mountpottinger and Carrickfergus. Two other churches did not offer a reply. The pastor of the Grange Corner church noted that he was unable to offer a definite reply because he could

should not be mixed shows once more how Baptists now felt compelled to move beyond their historical stance. The responses show that there were two key objections. The first was that effectively, local government would be in the hands of Catholic priests who would be the instruments of a new Irish Ascendancy under the Ultramontane hierarchy of the Catholic Church.[33] Secondly, it was believed that the domination of the Irish government by the Catholic Church would crush civil and religious liberties, especially those of Protestants.

With regard to the first of these objections there had been a longstanding belief among Irish Protestants that the papacy had an undue influence in Ireland. The appointment of Paul Cullen as Archbishop of Armagh in 1849 had greatly intensified this. Cullen was an Ultramontane and had sought to bring the Irish Church into closer conformity to Rome. Under his leadership the Irish Church grew more confident and more powerful. That Cullen had been sent to Ireland as an Apostolic Delegate confirmed the worst fears of many about the efforts on the part of Rome to influence the country's political affairs. The declaration of papal infallibility as a dogma of the Church in 1870, in a statement drafted by Cullen, further alarmed Protestants in both Ireland and England. Indeed, as McCaig pointed out, they had 'Mr. Gladstone's authority for dreading the political usurpation of Rome'.[34] The Irish Protestant shibboleth of the time was that 'Home Rule means Rome Rule'.

This fear of 'Rome Rule' led to the second great concern that civil and religious liberties would be crushed. McCaig made the point that 'civil and religious Liberty is already enjoyed to the full in Ireland'.[35] Such liberties were now threatened and a portent of what was to come had been seen 'in Roman Catholic districts [where] Protestants are denied the liberty of preaching the Gospel in the open air'.[36] In the 1890s, Catholic opposition to street preaching in Ireland had become a matter of public discussion with crowds of several thousand sometimes gathering to harangue preachers. As Matthew Kelly points out, this public, popular opposition 'justified unionist fears that home rule would mean Rome rule' where even leaders of nationalist opinion warned the protesters of the damage they were doing home rule.[37]

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not gather the collective opinion of the church. The pastor of the Limerick church could not express an opinion as the church was divided on the matter.

[33] Ultramontanism is a movement within the Catholic Church which advocates placing supreme authority in the hands of the Pope.

[34] 'Irish Baptists and Home Rule', 1893, p. 71. A reference to *The Vatican Decrees in their Bearing on Civil Allegiance*.

[35] 'Irish Baptists and Home Rule', 1893, p. 71.

[36] 'Irish Baptists and Home Rule', 1893, p. 75.

[37] Matthew Kelly, 'The Politics of Protestant Street Preaching in 1890s Ireland', *The Historical Journal*, 48 (2005): 101-125 (pp. 102, 103).

As McCaig and others expressed their fears they used the language of the loss of 'Civil and Religious Liberty'. In Protestant mythology, William III had secured 'Civil and Religious Liberty' during the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. The struggle to maintain these freedoms provided a rationale for the newly re-energised Orange Order. That Irish Baptists were using this language and were quite conscious of its provenance is reflected in the words of Pastor Simpson of Dungannon, who warned of the danger of 'dragging us back to the sad and servile time of James II'.[38] It was ironic that Baptists employed this language, since in Ireland such liberties had historically been the preserve of the Church of Ireland while Dissenters, along with the Catholic majority in Ireland, had only gained legal parity as a result of disestablishment in 1869. It demonstrates that while Baptists might have considered themselves to be distinctive in their views regarding the relationship between religion and politics, they were simply another part of a broad cultural Protestant movement. Furthermore, while they had benefited from disestablishment, they were at the same time looking to the wider Protestant civil establishment to protect them.

That Irish Baptists simply shared the concerns of other Protestants is seen in the other common objections to the Bill found on the pages of the magazine. These were that the Bill would threaten the religious interests of Ireland, both Protestant and Catholic; that the current proposal would lead to civil unrest and financial ruin; that political power in Ireland would be ceded to a militant minority; and that the measure would damage the unity of the British Empire. David Hempton and Myrtle Hill list the most common arguments employed by Protestant churches against Home Rule and they are almost identical to those listed by Irish Baptists in the pages of the magazine.[39] Despite repeated statements amongst the contributors that they did not wish to make political comments, these concerns show that their anxieties were not all religious, rather they reflected the common political and economic concerns of all Protestants.

When the Second Home Rule Bill was defeated in the House of Lords in September 1893 the crisis passed once more and Home Rule was not revived for almost another twenty years. For Irish Baptists, at least publicly, it was almost as if it had never happened. There was little political comment in print or from the platform in subsequent years on this, or on other political matters.

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[38] 'Irish Baptists and Home Rule', 1893, p. 75.

[39] David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740-1890* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 180.

Irish Baptists, Home Rule and Baptist Principles

The experience of Irish Baptists during the Home Rule crisis points to the complexity of living out Baptist principles in the midst of real-life politics. This final section will explore some of these issues.

First, Irish Baptists had suffered as a small, under-resourced, politically disadvantaged community in Ireland who were almost at the point of extinction by the end of the eighteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century their fortunes had greatly revived. Although not a large denomination, they had experienced growth to the point where they could break free from English Baptist control and, ironically, exercise 'home rule'.[40] They were part of the vibrant late Victorian evangelical scene in Ireland and had obtained a large degree of respectability. Also, they had now found a degree of acceptance in a Protestant establishment that once excluded them. As such they shared with other Irish Protestant churches a form of opposition to Home Rule that 'rested on a cultural bedrock of Protestant assumptions and values'.[41]

The reality was that Baptists, whilst historically teaching the separation of church and state, believed in a Christian nation, by which they meant Protestant. This led them to seek to take shelter under the very religio-political structures to which, in theory, they were opposed. Indeed, they had become embedded in those structures.

Secondly, like other British and Irish Nonconformists in the nineteenth century, Irish Baptists had largely wedded their fortunes to those of the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party seemed to represent their political interests and offer the best hope of redressing their grievances. This had been demonstrated chiefly in the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland which 'tied Nonconformists to the Liberal Party'.[42] Gladstone also exuded moral authority and thereby Nonconformists 'gave Gladstone that popular worship which was so peculiarly essential to him'.[43] As one journalist at the time noted, there was amongst Nonconformists 'a fascination, amounting to fetishism, of the great name and personality of Mr. Gladstone'.[44] Yet, with Gladstone's sudden embrace of Home Rule they discovered that even the most seemingly entrenched political opinions can shift. Most English Nonconformists still followed him, now seeing Home Rule as a moral issue.

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[40] In 1888 control of the 'Irish Mission' had been passed from the Baptist Union to its affiliate the Irish Baptist Association. The Baptist Union of Ireland was formed in 1895.
[41] Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism*, p. 180.
[42] Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience,* p. 9.
[43] John F. Glaser, 'Parnell's Fall and the Nonconformist Conscience'*, Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 12 (1960), pp. 119-138 (p. 120).
[44] Quoted in Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience,* p. 101.

Irish Baptists, along with other Irish Nonconformists, were dismayed and Gladstone's moral authority evaporated.

Irish Baptists regularly commented that they did not preach politics and that their work was carried on by spiritual means. Yet, in reality, their hopes had become more aligned to the Liberal Party than they had perhaps realised. Gladstone's sudden change of heart exposed this and they subsequently felt obliged to enter the political arena. The truth, of course, was that as a skilled political operator Gladstone had been manipulating the 'Nonconformist Conscience' for political ends for decades. Irish Baptists had been too tied to the Liberal Party to see this. English Nonconformists continued to be blinded to this, which allowed the future Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George (1916–1922) 'still to play the Nonconformist card when it suited him'[45] on into the 1920s.

Thirdly, by the end of the nineteenth century Britain had adopted parliamentary democracy as its form of government, although universal suffrage remained some way off. With a Liberal majority duly elected in 1893, Home Rule became, in parliamentary terms, a legitimate government policy. The Irish Act of Union which the Irish Baptists were seeking to maintain was, on the other hand, widely recognised as a byword for political corruption. As Thomas Bartlett has noted, it was only made possible through the 'unprecedented disbursement of the "loaves and fishes" of place, pension, title, promotion, and even cash'.[46] Irish Baptists, who with other Nonconformists championed a fairer system of democratic government, now found themselves facing up to the realities of living with that system when it did not favour them.

One of the reasons that they had argued for resisting Home Rule was that it played into the hands of the movement's militant supporters. Yet, when they expressed the concern that implementing it would lead to unrest or even rebellion in Ulster, the most densely Protestant part of Ireland, there was no equal expression of the dangers of this militant reaction. It again reveals how blinkered they had become by their own political aspirations. Democracy meant accepting the governance of the elected government which, in this case, was promoting a policy to which they were opposed. This raised some uncomfortable questions for Irish Baptists.

Finally, one of the great concerns of Irish Baptists was that Home Rule would crush civil and religious liberties. Baptists, of course, prided themselves in standing for religious liberty. In their rejection of Home Rule they saw themselves as standing in that tradition. Their defence of liberties

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[45] Edward Royle, *Modern Britain: A Social History 1750-2011*, 3d edn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), p. 374.
[46] Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 232.

was not expressed, however, in the language of the Baptist tradition, which historically was the language of toleration. Rather, as noted above, it was expressed in the language of the Williamite tradition where the defence of 'civil and religious liberties' echoed the sentiments of the Protestant establishment and the newly revived Orange Order.

The Home Rule crisis raised important questions for Irish Baptists about what the protection of liberties meant. They saw the prospect of Rome rule as a serious threat to their liberties. This fear was borne, however, not only from their theological differences with Catholicism but an historical interpretation of the Catholic Church and its aspirations to ecclesiastical and political dominance. This was part of a widespread Protestant narrative that with Roman domination would come violent retribution in the manner of the 1641 Rebellion. That this was likely had been further reinforced by the more recent outrages associated with the 1798 Rebellion. Such anxieties were further exacerbated by the promulgation of the infallibility of a reactionary pope only two decades before the Home Rule proposals.

On the other hand, Irish Baptists expressed their fears that Home Rule would lead to the breakup of the British Empire, which displayed their beneficent view of the Empire as a force for good. This was despite the warnings of C.H. Spurgeon, their great hero, about the dangers of imperialism.[47] Their willingness to support the Empire leaves the impression that their view of liberties was very narrowly defined as the protection of their own historical rights, rather than expressing a concern for the liberties of all. This is in spite of their protests to the contrary.

Conclusion

With the passing of the Home Rule crisis the open espousal of politics largely disappeared from the Irish Baptist agenda. Once again, their focus returned to the proclamation of the gospel in Ireland. The issue of Home Rule, however, did not disappear but remained on the horizon before coming into full view again in 1912, when the Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith introduced the Third Home Rule Bill. This did not, it seems, provide the same flurry of activity amongst Irish Baptists, at least at an organisational level. When Colonel Robert Waters attempted to introduce a resolution on Home Rule at the annual Baptist Union of Ireland assembly, he was dissuaded as the Union sought to maintain 'a neutral stance'.[48] Some

[47] For example, see Spurgeon's sermon 'Independence of Christianity', 31 August 1857, in *The New Park Street Pulpit: Volume 3, 1857* (London: Alabaster and Passmore, 1858), pp. 333-340. Spurgeon was one of the most vocal English Baptist critics of Home Rule which further enhanced his standing amongst Irish Baptists.

[48] Thompson, 'Baptists in Ireland 1792-1922', p. 272.

Baptists, such as Pastor Alexander Jardine of Mountpottinger Church in Belfast, again stated their uneasiness about becoming involved in politics.[49] Other Baptists, including several pastors, did act however, and reflecting the militant spirit of the time signed the Ulster Covenant which promised to use 'all means which may be found necessary' to resist Home Rule.[50] Yet, perhaps the mood amongst Irish Baptists was best captured in the words of Dr S.J. Reid in *The Irish Baptist Magazine* as he anticipated that nothing, it seemed, could now stop Home Rule. He wrote that 'a long and painful road must be travelled. Many an hour of bitter and heart-breaking defeat await the Protestants.'[51]

Reid could not have known the prescience of his words. A decade later Irish Protestants, including Irish Baptists, had lived through the Great War, the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, the division of Ireland into two jurisdictions and a civil war. For many, a long and painful road still lay ahead.

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[49] David Fitzpatrick, *Descendancy: Irish Protestant Histories since 1795* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 118.

[50] Those pastors who signed the Ulster Covenant included Isaac P. Bell (Ballymacarrett, Belfast); James W. Brown (Tobermore); R.J. Murphy (Tandragee); William James Thomson (Clough); Thomas Warwick (Dungannon) and George Rock (without charge). Those who signed the covenant can be traced at https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/search-ulster-covenant.

[51] 'The Irish Protestant Churches and Home Rule', *The Irish Baptist Magazine*, XXXVI, No.10, October 1912, p. 129.