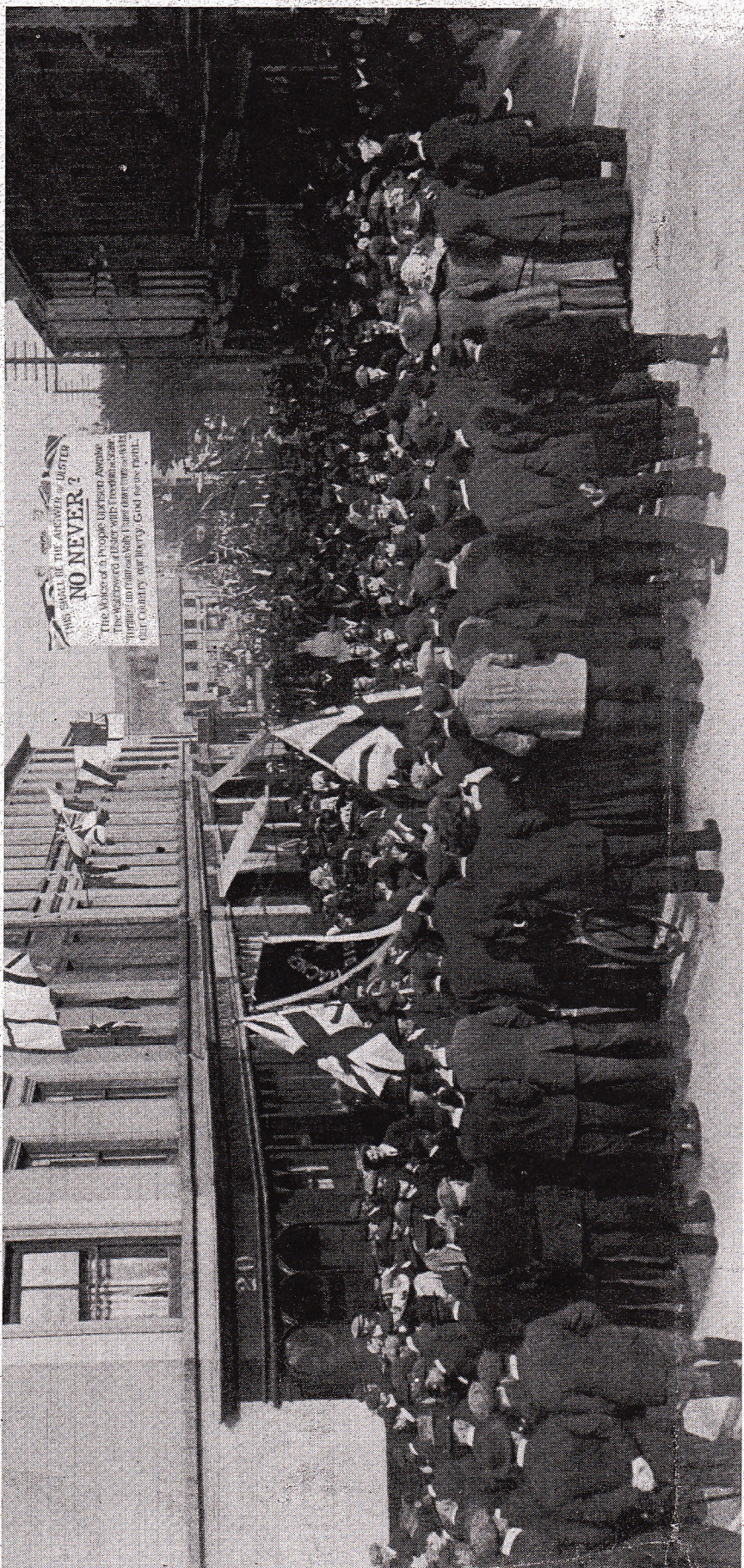


Apparent achievement of Home Rule was an illusion



and deeply disturbing: FE McWilliam's bronze sculpture, *Woman in Bomb*
1. ESTATE OF FE McWILLIAM/COLLECTION ULSTER MUSEUM

Art of the Troubles runs at the Ulster Museum in Belfast until September 7th
Noel Whelan is on leave

garments: EVERYBODY
be seen to care: Expressing
implausible grief is a way
of communicating your
great sensitivity.

if more people were
demolition of another' crys
ceiling. Obviously, the sums
are all child's play to me.



Ronan Fanning Opinion

The 1914 Act was a fudged compromise that could never have been implemented as it was enacted

History, as the teacher reminds the narrator in Julian Barnes's novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, is more than "the lies of the victors defeated".

When I quoted that passage last year in the introduction to *Fatal Path*, I suggested that one consequence of the revisionist debate about the Irish revolution was the legitimization of the self-delusions of those who see themselves as the heirs to the constitutional nationalists who had been so resoundingly defeated by the republican revolutionaries.

But I did not then expect we would so soon witness such a bizarre example as John Bruton's calling on the Government to commemorate the centenary of the enactment of the Home Rule Bill on September 18th, 1914.

Utopian exercise

Commemoration, I there wrote, is an entirely laudable if somewhat utopian political exercise. But it is not history. The danger is that its practitioners would shrink from seeking to establish a value-free history of 1912-1922, but would instead massage history into moulds designed to persuade the people of Ireland, North and South, unionist and nationalist, to prefer modes of commemoration least likely to exacerbate the latent tensions between divided communities.

Again, let me emphasise, an admirable political objective in theory. But, in practice, the propagation of a bland,

hybrid of history which, if carried to extremes, is more likely to provoke political outrage than to command intellectual respect, let alone consensus.

John Bruton's clarion call represents just such an extreme because it flies in the face of two historical realities about the third Home Rule Bill. The first is that the Bill was always an exercise in hypocrisy. Asquith's government never intended that it should be enacted in the form in which it was introduced.

Although the Parliament Act of 1911 destroyed the House of Lords' permanent veto on Home Rule, it legitimised a two-year veto. This meant that, although the Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1912, it could not be enacted before the high summer of 1914.

Surrendered control

This diminished the authority of ministers in parliament and surrendered control of the political timetable to the Ulster unionists and their Tory allies at Westminster because the Parliament Act ensured that the crisis must suppurate until 1914.

The arch-hypocrite at the cabinet meeting of February 6th, 1912, that decided on the terms of the Bill was the Irish chief secretary, Augustine Birrell.

Birrell saw his role as keeping sweet John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party that held the balance of power in the House of Commons. This meant his publicly opposing Ulster's exclusion from the terms of the Home Rule Bill despite his personal belief – of which he had earlier privately advised two of his most powerful cabinet colleagues, David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill – that he anticipated civil war unless at least part of Ulster was excluded from the Bill's terms of reference.

But political expediency demanded that Birrell conceal his convictions. So when Lloyd George, backed by Churchill, formally proposed Ulster's exclusion to the cabinet on February 6th, 1912, Birrell spoke against it, and the procrastination of Asquith and Birrell prevailed over the pragmatism of Lloyd George and Churchill.

The cabinet's decision that the Home Rule Bill "as introduced should apply to the whole of Ireland" meant nothing because it was hedged about by two caveats. That Redmond "should from the first be given clearly to understand that

make such changes in the Bill as fresh evidence of facts, or the pressure of British opinion, may render expedient"; and that "if, in the light of such evidence or indication of public opinion, it becomes clear as the Bill proceeds that some special treatment must be provided for the Ulster counties, the government will be ready to recognise that necessity".

This amounted to a tacit invitation to revolution: the more seditious Ulster's unionists became, the more persuasive would be the "fresh evidence" and the more likely that "public opinion" would indicate that they must receive "some special treatment". The Augustinian invocation "Give me chastity but not yet" was of the same order as Asquith's attitude to Ulster's exclusion.

"I have always thought (and said) that, in the end, we should probably have to make some sort of bargain about Ulster as the price of home rule", he wrote in September 1913.

"But I have never doubted, that, as a



One consequence of the revisionist debate on Irish revolution was legitimization of self-delusions of those who see themselves as heirs to constitutional nationalists

matter of tactics and policy, we were right to launch our Bill on its present lines".

The Ulster unionists' threat of violence duly bore fruit on March 9th, 1914, when Asquith told the House of Commons the terms of the "bargain" he had just imposed upon the hapless John Redmond: the exclusion of Ulster from the terms of the Bill for six years.

The partition of Ireland, probably unavoidable since the cabinet meeting of February 6th, 1912, thus became inevitable.

Although the compromise that put the Irish problem on ice for the duration of the Great War disguised this inevitability, it

to the Manor House Grounds, Coleraine, County Derry, in an Anti-Home Rule demonstration. PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES)

was yet another exercise in hypocrisy. This time Redmond was complicit because the core of the compromise was his idea: that if the government would postpone the introduction of the amending Bill providing for Ulster's exclusion, he would agree to the suspension of the coming into effect of the Bill (despite its being immediately put upon the Statute Book) until the amending Bill became law.

Put simply, Redmond agreed to the suspension of Home Rule, and Asquith agreed to the suspension of partition. But the announcement of the deal was accompanied by an explicitly partitionist assurance from Asquith that "the coercion of Ulster [was] absolutely unthinkable".

The enthusiasm with which John Redmond and his party greeted the announcement of the royal assent to the Government of Ireland Act in the House of Commons, on September 18th, 1914, and which John Bruton now asks us to embrace was as misplaced as the embitterment of the unionists who walked out of the House en bloc.

Inescapable reality

For the other inescapable historical reality was that the apparent achievement of Home Rule was illusory: the Suspensory Act disguised but could never reverse the British government's commitment to the principle that Ulster's unionists had rights of self-determination comparable to Ireland's nationalists.

Mr Bruton, in short, is calling for the commemoration of a settlement that never was: the 1914 Act was a fudged compromise that could never have been implemented as it was enacted.

The deafening silence of the Government's response at least offers hope that, even if Ministers are uninhibited by the fact that such a commemoration would be historically disreputable, they may have already realised that it would be politically unwise.

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