

HOME RULE: ITS STORY

STARTED FORTY-THREE YEARS AGO

On the morning of May 20, 1870—a date which fell on Friday 43 years ago—Irish daily papers contained reports of a modest meeting held on Thursday, May 19, at the Bilton Hotel, in Sackville (now O'Connell) street, Dublin. It was not a 'mass' or a 'monster' meeting; it was not even a 'convention,' as the Convention Act had not then been repealed; it was simply (says a writer in the *Irish Weekly*) an assemblage of well-known Dublin citizens and of more or less prominent Irishmen from various parts of the country; and they met to take into account the existing condition of Irish political affairs, and, if possible, to frame a policy that might commend itself to the favor of the people. That was a critical and rather despairful period of Irish history. The Fenian Movement had failed—so far; but it had not been destroyed by any means—and only five days previously—on Saturday, May 14—

A Young Irishman Named Michael Davitt, then resident in England, had been arrested at London on a charge of 'feloniously conspiring to depose the Queen, and to levy war against her.' Of 'constitutional agitation' the people had sickened when Keogh and Sadlier killed the Tenants Right Movement in the 'fifties. A few men had struggled on, wearily and somewhat hopelessly, to keep the idea of an independent Irish National Party in the British Parliament alive; but their success was less than partial; and even Mr. Gladstone had acknowledged that he had been impelled to disestablish the 'Irish' Church by 'the intensity of Fenianism.'

The Disestablishment of the Church was, to a great extent, directly responsible for the meeting at the Bilton Hotel on May 19, 1870. Tory politicians—then, as now, mainly of the landlord class—were disgusted and dissatisfied. They had waged a fierce fight against Gladstone's Bill; they had pleaded and threatened—invoked the spirit of religion and proclaimed their determination to plunge the country into 'civil war'; but English policy was pursued, despite their outcries and clamors, with merciless consistency. Disestablishment was a direct violation of a fundamental 'Article' of the Act of Union; and the Union itself was no longer sacrosanct in Irish Tory eyes. It seems the first suggestion regarding the meeting came from Isaac Butt, Q.C. Mr. Butt had been O'Connell's antagonist in the Dublin Corporation 26 years previously; and the Liberator had praised the young lawyer's speech and predicted his conversion to popular opinions. The conversion was gradual. Butt threw himself with all his natural enthusiasm into the defence of the Fenian prisoners; and for two or three years he fought their cause from court to court with magnificent zeal and ability. Meanwhile he had done excellent work for Land Reform; and his intellectual supremacy was readily acknowledged by the sixty men who sat by him at the Bilton Hotel. A list of the sixty-one is now something in the nature of a historic document. The Lord Mayor of Dublin, a Conservative named Mr. Purdon, presided; and the others were:—

A Mixed Assemblage.

Sir William Wilde ('Speranza's' husband, and an eminent citizen of Dublin), Sir John Barrington, D.L.; James V. Mackey, J.P.; Cornelius Dennehy, T.C.; E. H. Kinahan, J.P.; James Martin, J.P.; Rev. Joseph Galbraith, F.T.C.D.; R. W. Boyle (a banker); Isaac Butt, Q.C.; W. L. Erson, J.P.; W. W. Harris, LL.D., ex-High Sheriff of Co. Armagh; Edward M. Hodson, W. H. Kerr, Major Knox, D.L.; Graham Lemon, J. F. Lombard, J.P.; W. P. J. McDermott, Alexander McNeale, W. Maher, T.C., P.L.G.; George Austin, T.C., Clontarf; Dr. Barry, George Beatty, Joseph Begg, Robert Callow, Edward Carrigan, Charles Connolly, D. B. Cronin, John Wallis, T.C.; P. Walsh, John Webster, George F. Shaw, F.T.C.D.; P. J. Smyth, George E. Stephens, Henry H. Stewart, M.D.; L. J. O'Shea, J.P.; Alfred Webb,

William Campbell, William Daniel, William Deaker, P.L.G.; Alderman Gregg, Alderman Hamilton, Alderman Manning, J.P.; John Martin, Dr. Maunsell, George Moyers, J. Nolan, James O'Connor, Anthony O'Neill, T.C.; Thomas Ryan, J. H. Sawyer, M.D.; Jas. Reilly, P.L.G.; Alderman Plunket, The Ven. Archdeacon Goold, D.D., M.B.; A. M. Sullivan, Peter Talty, William Shaw, M.P.; Captain Edward R. King-Harman, J.P.; Hon. Lawrence Harman King-Harman, D.L.

Truly, they were a 'mixed' assemblage. Three were members of the Orange Order; three had been prominently connected with Fenianism—one, the late Mr. James O'Connor, had only recently been released after serving several years in penal servitude; 14 were adherents of the policy of Repeal; 10 were reckoned as Liberals; and the remaining 31 were undoubtedly Tories. At most, 17 were Nationalists out of the 61. Landlords were there; several merchants; many eminent lawyers and members of other professions; and they came from all the four provinces.

James O'Connor and Alfred Webb died quite recently—both 'in harness' as active participants in the Home Rule movement; men like A. M. Sullivan, Professor Galbraith, and many others did their share of the work while they lived, and 'fell and passed away'; many others became mere 'nominal Home Rulers,' and faded out of public life before the advancing tide of robust Nationality; some recanted; and now only one member of the original 61 remains alive—the veteran Dublin Tory knight, Sir George Moyers, who survives at the age of 77. But on the 19th of May, just 43 years ago, all those Conservatives, Liberals, and Nationalists united in passing

The Following Resolution—

'That it is the opinion of this meeting that the true remedy for the evils of Ireland is the establishment of an Irish Parliament with full control over our domestic affairs.' And thus the Home Rule movement was founded. Never since that memorable 19th May, 1870, has the Irish people's claim been withdrawn for a moment or radically altered in any degree. If only one survivor of the Bilton Hotel meeting remains—and that a Unionist now—there are still with us hundreds of men who adopted the Home Rule policy within the week, and whose allegiance has never wavered; while the countless thousands who have fought and fallen in the ranks of the Movement since 1870 have left memories behind them which their friends in Ireland will not willingly let die.

The Rev. Dr. Galbraith, one of the most distinguished scholars ever connected with Trinity College, suggested the term 'Home Rule'; and the 'Home Rule Association' was the immediate outcome of the Bilton Hotel meeting. Three years later the name of the organisation was altered to 'Home Rule League.' But, though the people were earnest, the majority of their 'leaders' in Parliament were—well, frail. A. M. Sullivan has written: 'No constitutional lawyer, such as Butt and O'Connell were, could ever prove successful leaders of a life-and-death struggle for liberty, such as Ireland had been fighting for centuries.' A General Election in 1874 gave the new league its opportunity. But:—

'There was a great lack of candidates, or rather of suitable ones, and it was owing to this fact that the new Home Rule Party, when it was elected, was of a very mixed description. . . . Still, the result of the election was that for the first time since the Union the majority of the Irish members were nominally pledged to support the demand for a native Parliament. Altogether, they mustered sixty votes. Among the new members were Mr. Joseph Biggar, elected for Cavan, and Mr. A. M. Sullivan, elected for Co. Louth; but too many of the new party were of the place-hunting type—men who were ready to make any promises to electors for the sake of getting into Parliament. Butt was quite unable to control the nondescript party. The true patriots among his colleagues recognised his many virtues and his sincere love of Ireland and genuine desire to serve her, but even a greater leader than Butt

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