

The Irish Revolution and How It Came About

(By WILLIAM O'BRIEN.)
INTRODUCTION.

When the United Irish League re-established the Political Unity broken up for ten years by the Parnell Split of 1890, the "miracle" (see page 18) was followed up by a movement for a wider National Unity, the effects of which are only now beginning to be understood. Its aim was the daring one of reconciling the two antagonistic hosts of the Land War, and combining them for the crowning achievement of a National Settlement by consent.

The inspiring principle of the new movement was the healing of animosity between Irishmen of all the warring classes and religious persuasions, and, upon that basis, an international peace with England. Its fundamental axioms were (a) that a solution of the Irish Difficulty must first be sought among Irishmen in Ireland, and (b) that its legislative enactment must be the work, not of one particular English Party, Liberal or Unionist, but of all British and Irish Parties in common. These are the principles which—received at the time with mild contempt by English politicians as an Eirenicon, and persecuted by certain powerful Irish ones as though they covered some monstrous treason against the Irish Nation—have by this time found all but universal acceptance in both countries and among all Parties in the Act of 1903 for the abolition of Landlordism and (although in a mutilated shape) in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Not, however, before armed Revolution had to be called in to repair, so far as was possible, the tragic mistakes of Irish and British politicians during nearly twenty ignoble years.

The era of confessions and of contrition has already set in from the British side. One passage from a confidential letter of Mr. Lloyd George to the writer (dated July 14, 1919), which Mr. Lloyd George has given me permission to publish (see page 416) reveals at a flash the secret of the failure in the intermediate years and explains the necessity for the present volume:

"I think you were fundamentally right when you sought an agreement amongst all sections, creeds, and classes of Irishmen. I am afraid settlement is impossible until that has been achieved."

Here is the mature conclusion of the British Prime Minister that the Policy of Conciliation plus Business of the All-for-Ireland League was "fundamentally right" from the start, and that its defeat was the defeat of everything that mattered for the two countries. The confession is all the more interesting because it comes from the man who was long the most potent British instrument in deriding and thwarting the policy to which he now has the courage to do justice. And it will be found that even at that late date he had only half learned the lesson taught by the Irish Revolution.

Another testimony of transcendent interest is that of one who, of all the Liberal Cabinet who might have carried Home Rule and did not, had least of the party politician and most of the far-reaching statesman in his composition—Viscount Grey of Fallodon (the Sir Edward Grey of the Home Rule debates). Here is the fruit of his musings over the Liberal mishandling of Home Rule (House of Lords, November 24, 1920):

"The question I put to myself is this: In the years of failure where have we gone wrong? What has been the root-cause of our failure? . . . I think the mistake we made in the beginning was that we did not sufficiently realise the absolute necessity of taking into consideration the feeling of Ulster."

Truly, a Daniel come to judgment! But that was only half the mistake—the other and the still graver half being that they "did not sufficiently realise" the feeling of Ireland for Ulster as bone of her bone, and the breath of life of her unity as a Nation. The result was that having first refused to woo Ulster by "compulsory attraction" they proceeded to their opposite extremity of folly by cutting her off from Ireland with the slash of a clumsy surgeon's knife.

The Hibernian politicians, who were the prime movers of the mischief which undid the country and the Liberals and themselves, have not yet imitated the good sense of

their British patrons by (as the French would say) entering upon the way of avowals on their own part. They have, however, ceased to count. It is only the evil they have done that lives after them. But how completely all the leaders who succeeded them as the authorised spokesmen of the Irish race since the downfall of the Parliamentarians, share and have made their own of the aspirations which used to be the especial reproach of the All-for-Ireland League, two short quotations will sufficiently demonstrate. Wrote Mr. Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Fein and the first President of the Irish Free State:

"The exclusion of Ulster or any part of Ireland would mean for us the nullification of our hopes and aspirations for the future Irish Nation. It would mean the erection of sharp, permanent, eternal dividing-lines between Catholics and Protestants, whereas our ideal has been an Irish nation in the future made up of a blend of all races, of all classes and of all creeds."

Mr. de Valera himself, the first President of the Irish Republic, said to me so late as August 12, 1922 (see page 429):

"I have been all along in favor of peace with England, and at one time could have carried it all right, if Lloyd George had placed me in a position to offer the young men a measure of National Independence for the whole country on reasonable terms of external association. In the London negotiations I should have preferred to make our first stand upon the Integrity of Ireland, and the inclusion of the Six Counties. All the world would have understood our stand against Partition and would have been with us, and in England's then fix Craig could have been certainly brought to consent. . . . I was always ready to go as far as you went yourself to bring in Ulster by friendly means."

To clinch the matter, President Cosgrave and the Chamber of Deputies of the Irish Free State, while these sheets are passing through the Press, have invited the whole four of the representatives of the Land-owners at the Land Conference of 1902-3—the Earl of Dunraven, the Earl of Mayo, Col. (now Sir) W. Hutcheson Poe, and Col. (now Sir) Nugent Everard to accept seats in the new Senate, and have acclaimed Mr. T. M. Healy as their first Governor General, thus singling out for honor in the eyes of posterity the Conciliationists who for the previous fifteen years were covered with opprobrium as "swindling landlords" or traitors to Home Rule.

How came it to pass that the policy which all the weightiest of the elder statesmen of Britain and the two most considerable personages of the Irish Revolution are thus united in pronouncing to have been elementary wisdom, had to struggle for a bare hearing throughout a fifteen-years' losing battle? By what arts were a people of keen political intelligence like the Irish hypnotised into silence while they were being led into an opposite policy which it is now hard to distinguish from insanity and which was to bring them nothing but six years of unspeakable anguish and a prodigal waste of their best blood and treasure? How did it happen that those who, with an all but unanimous mandate from their country and from the Parliamentary Party, had succeeded in restoring four-fifths of the soil of Ireland to the people, and were proceeding to incorporate a million of Irish Protestants with our nation by their free consent, were actually arraigned as though these were the crimes of traitors? Above all, how came it that those who, themselves confessing they were rebelling against the policy which received from the country "an absolute overwhelming vote of confidence" (see page 17) rose up to frustrate these great enterprises and to alarm and alienate that powerful minority of our countrymen by the establishment of a pseudo-Catholic Hibernian ascendancy leading to no alternative except the Partition of Ireland, to which they became themselves consenting parties—how came it that the mutineers were for a long course of years glorified as the anointed apostles of "Majority Rule" and the heroes of National Unity? These are amongst the enigmas to which the present volume is designed to supply the answers.

Not the least strange part of the story is that this is the first time when the truth will have a dog's chance of coming to the knowledge of the masses of the nation it most vitally concerns. Such is the completeness with which the facts have hitherto been travestied beyond all

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