

# The Irish Revolution and How It Came About

(By WILLIAM O'BRIEN.)

## CHAPTER I.—HOW THE ALL-FOR-IRELAND LEAGUE BECAME A NECESSITY.

(1910)

The All-for-Ireland League was founded on March 31, 1910. For seven years after the revolt of Mr. Dillon and the *Freeman* against the authorised National Policy in 1903 we had struggled on as best we might without any separate national organisation of our own and in the face of a hostile press which prevented the greater part of the country from reading anything except monstrous misrepresentations of our arguments, so far as our words were not suppressed altogether. We did so in the hope that the incapacity of the revolters to produce any practical policy of their own and the amazing progress of the abolition of landlordism in those counties where our advice had been followed would gradually influence "The Party" to return to the Policy of appeasement to which they had, with a single exception, pledged themselves in 1903. Public opinion did, in fact, compel "The Party" to accept, with a few verbal alterations, the conditions which I suggested in a speech in Wexford in 1907 as those on which the Party might be reunited, and these conditions, embodied in a formal Treaty at the Mansion House Conference at which Mr. Redmond and Bishop O'Donnell acted on the one part and Father James Clancy and myself on the other, beyond all question re-pledged the Party "cordially to welcome that co-operation of Irishmen of all classes and creeds" which was the essence of the National Policy of 1903. Had that reunion been followed up in true democratic fashion, by referring the Treaty to a National Convention, for endorsement or otherwise, nobody was in less doubt than Mr. Dillon that the reunion would have become a genuine one from which no factionist would henceforth dare to break away.

His successful opposition to the holding of a National Convention was the first symptom of how he regarded the Treaty to which he submitted without one gracious word. He and his followers next proceeded, at a private meeting of the Party, to violate the Treaty in its essence, by voting down by 42 votes to 15 a proposal to welcome the co-operation of the landlord organisation in defeating the Treasury Bill by which the great Act of 1903 was eventually repealed and Land Purchase killed. Once more—his necessities, not his will, consenting—Mr. Redmond sat silent in the chair while the Treaty, to which his was the first signature, was torn to tatters under his eyes. Mr. Dillon's next step, in his new campaign of disruption, was to direct Mr. Asquith and Mr. Birrell—as the most charitable must conclude it was he alone who could have directed them—to refuse upon an infantile pretext to receive the most representative deputation who ever went out of Munster—a deputation representing the united strength of the landlord and tenant class, of the members of Parliament and elective Councils of the South—the very incarnation of that co-operation of Irishmen of all ranks and religious professions which the Treaty of Reunion declared to be the best hope of the nation. Even that elementary constitutional right of remonstrance with the Government who were planning the destruction of Land Purchase must be denied with insult to the representatives of the people by a Home Rule Prime Minister who was at the same moment giving an effusive hearing to a deputation from the Scottish liquor trade on the subject of whisky duties. Violation number two of the Treaty of Reunion on which Mr. Healy and myself and five of our colleagues had been fraudulently lured back to the Party.

My growing feeling that it was no longer possible to remain associated with a Party so faithless to the nation and to their colleagues was decided once for all by the infamous extinction of free speech at "The Baton Convention" (February 9, 1909). The question to be debated was nothing less than whether the English Treasury was to be relieved from the most favorable financial bargain ever secured for Ireland, and relieved by the connivance, and even by the votes, of Ireland's own representatives. Upon a question of the first magnitude such as this free-

dom of speech was crushed with the strong hand by a band of Hibernians, armed with revolvers, who were imported by special train from Belfast, and marched to the Mansion House in military order, where they took possession of every approach to the Convention Hall, while the interior of the Hall was occupied by another force of baton-men, paid 10s a day for their services, who were armed with boxwood batons of the type used by the police, attached to the wrists of the men who wielded them by leathern thongs. Two-thirds of the assembly even as sifted through the Hibernian turnstiles were honest agriculturists eager to hear both sides of a debate on which the hope of emancipation of hundreds of thousands of their class was hanging. The others were, to put it bluntly, armed ruffians, town-bred and knowing no more of the merits or demerits of the Birrell Repealing Bill under discussion than most of us do of the laws of relativity. Their job was to prevent one connected sentence from any opponent of the Birrell Bill reaching the straining ears of the assembly in general, and this they did by the yells of savages, and where the yells did not suffice, by swinging their batons and producing their revolvers and assaulting everybody "with a Cork accent" who made bold to utter a word of remonstrance. By enlightened methods such as these, they stifled almost every syllable of a speech from myself which, it is quite safe to say, would now be read by all disinterested Irishmen as an argument of common-sense so obvious as to be commonplace and as a forewarning of the national misfortune which has since slain Land Purchase by Irish hands. My amendment was: "That any Bill based on the lines of the Birrell Land Bill of last Session must lead to the stoppage of Land Purchase for an indefinite number of years in the interest of the British Treasury and impose an intolerable yearly penalty upon those tenant-purchasers whose purchase money the Treasury has failed to provide." I wonder if even the rudest of the disturbers at the Baton Convention or of their employers could now read that amendment without a pang of remorse.

My observations pointing out how easily the Treasury Bill might even still be defeated by that "co-operation of Irishmen of all classes and creeds to complete the abolition of Landlordism," which the Party had in solemn words pledged themselves "cordially to welcome" as the condition of the Reunion, were received with still more ferocity when seconded by Father James Clancy, my colleague at the Conference by which the Treaty of Reunion, now cast to the winds, was subscribed by Mr. Redmond and his Party under every condition that could bind men of honor. The arrival of Mr. Healy on the platform was the final signal for closing instantly, and amidst a scene of deafening confusion a debate in which not a single sentence of protest was suffered to be heard against the English Treasury Bill. Its nominal adoption by the Baton Convention sentenced over a hundred thousand Irish tenants from that day to this to servitude in the toils of landlordism in order to enable the English Treasury to realise a dishonest economy and to gratify the spleen of two or three politicians against the Land Conference and against the Wyndham Act of 1903 which was its fruit.\* If the Hibernian Party committed no other evil deed against Ireland, students of the record of the Baton Convention will, I think, agree that the foul business was in itself sufficient to make its organisers worthy politically to die the death, and will only

\*From this censure I desire expressly to exclude Mr. Davitt. His faith was in nationalisation of the land, and his opposition to the Wyndham Act, or to any other scheme of peasant proprietary, was consistent and perfectly legitimate. It has always been a consolation to me to remember that in all those years of controversy no word personally hurtful to Mr. Davitt has ever escaped me. His last letter to me upon a private matter shortly before his death was as full of manly friendship as if nothing had happened since the period of loyal comradeship he and I spent together during the hard years when the United Irish League was being formed out of the ruins of the National movement. Nobody with any intimate knowledge of Mr. Davitt will doubt that had he been alive at the time of the Baton Convention he would have forbidden with indignation the preparations for that orgy of violence or would have separated himself with loathing from its organisers.

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