

‘From Mass Mobilisation to Terror Tactics: Irish Responses to the New Security System’.

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Introduction

Ireland was the crucible of Castlereagh’s political thought’.¹ So notes John Bew, Castlereagh’s leading biographer, in his recent study of the ‘Insular Statesman’ who played a key role in restoring order to Europe in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. Ireland is critical to any understanding of Castlereagh’s thinking: it was where he came of age as a politician, and it was the place where he developed his ideas on the relationship between religion, state and society. The Irish Act of Union, a bold exercise in state formation which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801, could be seen as an early prototype in Castlereagh’s thinking, the domestic policy corollary of the Congress system.² The Union was an attempt to create (in a sense) a ‘Concert of the United Kingdom’, a new mechanism for addressing the problems in Ireland, which until then had its own parliament and was technically its own kingdom, while also providing a more stable political structure for Britain and the empire. The failure of the Union to address – or at least contain – the religious, political, and social problems on the island of Ireland will be explored in this paper. A process of de-politicisation gave way to re-politicisation, as a constitutional nationalist campaign undermined the foundations of the arrangement which came into effect on 1 January 1801. In turn, the failure of peaceful nationalism allowed violent, militant

¹ John Bew, *Castlereagh: the biography of a statesman* (London, 2014), p. 571.

² Mark Jarrett explores expertly the various objectives of the Congress system in *The Congress of Vienna: War and Great Power Diplomacy after Napoleon* (London, 2013) and outlines a structure that will be explored further here.

republicanism to shatter the settlement completely. Discussing the failure of the 'Holy Alliance' between 1815 and 1847, Georges Weill recognised that it had failed to 'resist the progress of the national idea'.³ The British attempt to construct its own system of state security, and resist the progress of Irish nationalism, failed in the exact same period, and for the exact same reason.

While the Union was not Castlereagh's brain-child, he did guide it through the Irish political system despite considerable opposition both inside and outside of parliament, and in Ireland it became his legacy. As he reflected in 1801, the Union was an opportunity to develop a 'system, without hazarding the powers of the state itself,' which might be 'best calculated, if not warmly to attach at least to disarm the hostility of those classes in the community who cannot be got rid of, and must be governed'.⁴ In other words, it was an attempt to create a new system of state security, to combat the disaffection of the newly politicised Irish radicals, who had aligned with France in the 1790s, and who had helped bring about a bloody rebellion in Ireland in the summer of 1798.

Unfortunately for Castlereagh, the attempt to develop a new system for Ireland was undermined from the very start. Catholic emancipation – the granting of full political and civil rights to the majority of the people on the island – was not conceded immediately, as the gift of the government of the new United Kingdom, bringing about the resignations of Prime Minister William Pitt, Castlereagh himself, and most of the government.⁵ Ireland was

³ Quoted in Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789–1914* (Berkeley, 2011), p. 40.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See P.M. Geoghegan, *The Irish Act of Union* (Dublin, 1999).

quiet for a time, but following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, and the attempt to create an international equilibrium through the Congress system, a campaign began in Ireland to re-politicise and mobilise the masses. This campaign culminated in the winning of Catholic civil rights in 1829, but failed in its attempts to secure a semi-independent Irish parliament in the 1840s. The failure of constitutional politics – just as a terrible famine was to change irrevocably Irish society - allowed for a return to more radical forms of attack, and Britain faced its first ‘war on terror’ in the 1880s when bombings and assassinations were used to try and terrify the government into conceding Irish independence.⁶ The failure of Castlereagh’s vision of an Ireland that would form an integral part of the British empire, through enlisting the support of the Catholic majority on the island, ensured a century of conflict from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to 1921, and left a legacy of bitterness that would continue into the 21st century.

Antecedents: The Politicisation of Ireland

The Union was conceived as a unifying security mechanism for Ireland. Between 1782 and 1798 the connection between Britain and Ireland had become increasingly fractured, and the problem of France using Ireland to achieve its objectives made a resolution of the problem a political priority in 1799-1800. There had been an upsurge in patriotic activity in Ireland following the outbreak of the American War of Independence, and Irish nationalist politicians took advantage of the weakness of the British state to press for free trade and greater political autonomy. In 1782 the Irish parliament declared its

⁶ See Shane Kenna, *War in the Shadows: the Irish-American Fenians who Bombed Victorian Britain* (Dublin, 2014).

legislative independence, a kind of parliamentary independence, although it was still tied to Britain economically and politically, and much of its legislation was still decided upon in London. It was a symbolic rather than a real change, but it remained a powerful symbol nonetheless. Crucially, at the heart of the new political relationship was the belief that the Irish nation was the Protestant nation, and this was to be a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people. That idea may have been tolerated if it had proven itself to be successful. Unfortunately for the champions of Ascendancy in the 1790s the state proved incapable of keeping the country under control and preventing foreign invasions. Change became necessary even if it meant sacrificing old allies.

At the same time there was a rise in a new kind of Irish nationalism, following the example of the French Revolution in 1789. Instead of excluding the Irish Catholics, who comprised four-fifths of the population, and denying them political and civil rights because of their perceived incapacity for liberty, it was proposed to give them full equality, replacing the name 'Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter' with the name 'Irishman'. This was the vision of the United Irishmen, a radical group founded in 1791, and it was soon declared illegal by the state once Britain and France were at war. And so it sought an alliance with France to help break the connection with Britain and establish an independent Irish Republic. In December 1796 a French armada set out to land in Ireland, and kick-start a rebellion, commanded by the leading, young French general of the time, Lazare Hoche. But bad weather and bad luck combined to prevent a landing, and Hoche was dead within a year after catching pneumonia on the difficult journey back. The abortive invasion, which would have caught the British defences completely by surprise, provoked a Catholic uprising, and

threatened the stability of the state, forced a rethink about Irish politics. A policy of repression was introduced and a 'white terror' was invoked to terrify the population into submission.

This was the context for the outbreak of the 1798 Rebellion, a bloody rebellion, part civil war, part low intensity conflict, where an estimated 30,000 people were killed, most of them rebels or civilians.⁷ A smaller French force landed in August 1798, by which time Ireland was convulsed by fighting, as the counties were sealed off, and the rebellion crushed by a British force commanded by Lord Cornwallis, the defeated general at Yorktown who had gone on to become a kind of imperial trouble-shooter. It fell to Cornwallis as lord lieutenant, and Castlereagh, as chief secretary, to try and implement a new political strategy. Following the outbreak of the rebellion, an immediate decision was taken by the Prime Minister, William Pitt, to abolish the Irish parliament and rule directly from London. The advantages were clear: the Irish parliament had proven itself incapable of governing efficiently and an imperial parliament would be better equipped to deal with Irish problems; Catholic emancipation could be granted safely by a united parliament without the fear of a Catholic majority in an Irish parliament looking for complete independence; it was a way of enlisting the Catholics into the war against France. Thus by reorganising the British polity and creating the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, a mechanism could be found to deal with the twin, related problems of domestic and foreign instability, removing Ireland as a future ally of France, and a source of rebellion and discontent.

⁷ See Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty* (London, 1969). Thomas Bartlett suggests the figure is lower, an estimated 10,000, however if the figures for those killed in the counter-revolutionary period before the rebellion are included it is significantly higher.

Castlereagh understood from the beginning the benefits of Union. As Bew has noted, he saw 'emancipation as just one building block in a whole rearrangement of the relationship between the state and Ireland's main religious groups'.⁸ 'The Insular Statesman' recognised the opportunities a merger would bring, establishing a mechanism to address the problems of religion and political power in Ireland by creating an imperial forum to address concerns that had previously been closely guarded. The problem was that the Union was defeated in 1799 by an Irish parliament jealously preserving its rights and privileges. It only passed in 1800 after a concerted campaign that involved bribery, the full disposal of government patronage, and implicit promises to the Catholics that emancipation would accompany the measure. The Union passed, and came into effect on 1 January 1801. Unfortunately the king, George III, had not been apprised of the developments, or the promises made, and reacted furiously when informed of them by opponents of Pitt. Given an ultimatum to back down, or leave office, Pitt resigned, in a departure that was as much a dismissal as a resignation. Castlereagh resigned with him, but his reputation among Irish nationalists was forever tainted by his association with the crushing of the 1798 Rebellion, and the passing of the Union by any means necessary.⁹ Crucially, the Catholics never felt part of the new imperial arrangement. As a unifying security mechanism the Act of Union was stillborn.

The Concert of the United Kingdom: the De-Politicisation of Ireland

⁸ Bew, *Castlereagh*, p. 143.

⁹ See P.M. Geoghegan, *Lord Castlereagh* (Dundalk, 2002).

Despite the failure to accompany the Union with emancipation, the United Kingdom was still able to achieve limited objectives for Ireland in its first years. Indeed it still provided a mechanism to eventually allow the granting of emancipation in 1829, although this time it was extracted rather than conceded gracefully. Castlereagh supported emancipation not because it was a right, but because it was the correct policy for permanent stability in Ireland. In the aftermath of the Union the country remained tranquil, despite an attempt to overturn the constitutional settlement in 1803, supported by France, which ended in a drunken riot. A process of de-politicisation took place, assisted by the culture of defeat which took hold following the crushing of the 1798 Rebellion and the abolition of the Irish parliament, and developed by successive lord lieutenants who were tasked with making the Union complete, and removing the impetus for political action.¹⁰ Tensions in Ireland were contained, rather than resolved, but it enabled Britain to fight a large-scale war against Napoleonic France, with substantial numbers of Irish troops and sailors, without having to worry about another front opening internally.¹¹

Mass Mobilisation and Popular Democracy: the Re-politicisation of Ireland

The containment of Irish nationalism only lasted as long as 1815. Following the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, and the post-war settlement of Europe, a new campaign began to work within the constitutional settlement to obtain full rights. Unable to achieve support for Catholic rights in the British parliament, despite the support of Castlereagh and

¹⁰ See Seán O'Reilly, 'Completing the Union: The Politics of Implementation in Ireland, 1801-1815' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2014).

¹¹ See Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffrey (eds), *A Military History of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996).

other leading figures, the campaign moved outside of parliament. 1815 marked the rise of Daniel O’Connell to a position of leadership in the nationalist movement, following the killing of a champion of the Protestant Ascendancy in a duel. A quick-witted lawyer (and part of the first generation of Catholics to be able to practice at the bar) and noted orator, O’Connell was determined to restore the legislative independence which had been won in 1782, but a parliament open to Catholics as well as Protestants, and the first objective was to secure full political and civil rights for Catholics, including the right to sit in the British House of Commons. Irish nationalism – which had been avowedly Protestant in the 1780s, and carefully non-sectarian in the 1790s – was now closely identified with Catholicism for the first time.¹²

Working within the constitutional settlement of 1801, but seeking to subvert and overturn it at every turn, O’Connell offered a challenge to the British state that could not be easily answered. Rather than rising up in force – which could be crushed easily like previous rebellions – O’Connell relied on moral force and moral persuasion, rallying the country in a peaceful, mass democratic movement in the 1820s. Supporters were asked to pay a penny-a-month, in an open crowdsourcing to fund the campaign, and a movement which had previously been restricted to upper and middle class supporters now became a mass movement. Making the decision to run for parliament himself, even though he was unable to take the seat if elected, O’Connell stood in a by-election in Co. Clare in 1828 and was successful. What terrified the British government even more than the election was what had accompanied it. O’Connell’s orders had been followed by the people without

¹² See P.M. Geoghegan, *King Dan: the Rise of Daniel O’Connell* (Dublin, 2008).

complaint, there had been no drinking of alcohol during the three weeks of the campaign, and no fighting, and the British army which had been deployed in case of trouble had no target to attack. Reflecting on O'Connell's power over the people, the Home Secretary Robert Peel admitted privately that the 'instrument of political power' in Ireland had been 'shivered to atoms'. The King, George IV, was determined to hold firm, but his Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, told him bluntly that he had defeated Napoleon in battle but could not defeat this kind of campaign, a people who had won their victory through peaceful means. The Union thus provided the mechanism by which emancipation was conceded in 1829, a full twenty-eight years after Pitt and Castlereagh had intended.

In the 1840s O'Connell began a second campaign outside of parliament to try and Repeal the Union, and restore the Irish parliament. In a single year – 1843 – he travelled all across Ireland addressing mass crowds, and providing weekly demonstrations of the level of support for Repeal. Thirty-one meetings were addressed between March and October 1843, and the crowds ran from 50,000 to 1 million in the popular accounts, an exaggeration, but indicative of the level of support. The meetings, dubbed 'monster meetings' by a hostile British press, represented the greatest threat to the Union since it came into operation. In the end the Union held firm. The meeting scheduled for Clontarf was declared illegal, O'Connell cancelled it, and was arrested and put on trial. Jailed and then released after the conviction was overturned, O'Connell never had the same level of support again. Increasingly the nationalist movement was splintered between the supporters of constitutional nationalism, and those who believed violent revolution was necessary to achieve results.

Ireland's Violent Memories

The Famine changed the nature of political debate in Ireland. The death of one million people, and the emigration of another million, over a five year period, transformed Irish society, and created a bitterness and resentment that propelled radical activity in the years ahead. It also produced a diaspora in the United States of people who had been forced to leave the country, one that was determined to get revenge. Over the next century – and beyond – radicals in the Irish-American community were to sustain and support the campaign for Irish independence, and provide crucial funds and weaponry. The constitutional framework of the Union was no longer big enough, or flexible enough, to support the new demands. An Irish parliament, tied to Britain, was no longer enough for radical Irish nationalism: complete separation was demanded. Although a Home Rule movement, seeking a kind of legislative independence within the imperial system, campaigned in the British parliament, it never succeeded in its objectives, and following the 1916 Rising its objectives were dismissed as too limited and unambitious. The most dramatic phase of the radical republican campaign was in the 1880s, when the invention of dynamite was seized upon by nationalists as an opportunity to take the war to Britain.

The idea of a bombing campaign originated in America among leading Fenians and aimed at toppling the British government by waging a war of terror against the civilian population. Publicity and money was arranged by Patrick Ford, the editor of the *Irish World*, and his newspaper exhorted 'Dynamite! Dynamite! Let every Irishman and

Irishwoman put a bit of it in their pocket and become a walking revolution'. Supported by Irish-American funds, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) began their bombing campaign in January 1881, with one device exploding in Salford outside Manchester. An undetonated bomb was discovered in the Mansion House in London two months later. The campaign had begun. In the months ahead town halls, gasworks, bridges, press offices, and railway and underground stations were targeted. This was something different to anything that had been experienced before in Britain, the use of terror to force a settlement of the Irish question. It was claimed that:

'With the tumbling down of those big English cities, down also would tumble England's credit. Down would go her insurance companies... Trade would be paralysed... India and all her other possessions would start to their feet... the lands stolen from the people of England would revert to them again and with the disappearance of this last relic of feudalism, up would ascend the English Republic'.¹³

Lindsay Clutterbuck has described the campaigners as the 'progenitors of terrorism'.¹⁴ To address the threat a counter-terrorism unit was set up in London – what became Special Branch - port searches were conducted, and suspicious individuals monitored, and arrested as Britain combatted the new challenge. Between 1881 and 1885 there were fifteen explosions on British soil, including one in the House of Commons. In 1883 seventy people

¹³ Niall Whelehan, *The Dynamiters: Irish Nationalism and Political Violence in the Wider World* (Cambridge, 2012), p.76.

¹⁴ Lindsay Clutterbuck, 'Countering Irish Republican Terrorism in Britain' in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18 (2006).

were injured by an explosion at Paddington station. In 1884 an attempt to blow up London Bridge backfired and three IRB men were killed. But the campaign failed to achieve its objectives, and there was a return to constitutional agitation – through the Home Rule Party – under the leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell. That said, its legacy endured. In 1883 a man called Thomas Clarke was arrested in London, soon after arriving from New York with a bag of dynamite that was intended for a new wave of attacks. Imprisoned for fifteen years hard labour – during which time he was regularly deprived of sleep and prevented from speaking - he went on to become one of the key figures in the planning of the 1916 Rising, and was the first signatory of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, a text that is now seen as Ireland’s Declaration of Independence.

Consequences

The Union as designed was an Alexandrian solution to the problem of a Protestant Irish parliament refusing to recognise the rights of Irish Catholics, while proving incapable of maintaining stability. It joined the Irish and British parliaments into a new federation, one where Irish concerns could be addressed within an imperial framework. The objective was to neutralise the threat of a dominant Catholic population in Ireland, securing loyalty by granting full political and civil rights in a unifying security mechanism. The failure to accompany the Union with emancipation in 1801 ensured that its death was contained in its birth. Emancipation became the rallying cry for a mobilisation of the forces of Irish nationalism in the 1820s and, although the second mass campaign to reverse the Union itself ended in failure in the 1840s, by challenging the legitimacy of the Union it unleashed new forces which could not be contained. Castlereagh did not live to see the Union face its

greatest challenges, but he would have understood the failures which made such challenges inevitable. Nevertheless he learned much from this early exercise in constructing a new system of political stability, one which balanced competing powers and interests, and attempted to contain nationalist feelings within a broader security framework. This new security regime provided only a limited security, one that was short-term and which could not be relied upon. While Castlereagh worked to correct the weaknesses in his lifetime, he was unable to persuade his colleagues of what needed to be done to make the Union complete before he died. However, in one sense, by failing to understand properly the true nature of Irish nationalism, the Union had already committed suicide.