

THE IRISH BOUNDARY QUESTION

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TO Canadians, who settled by amicable arrangement with the United States the greatest boundary question that has arisen between civilized peoples, it may well seem that the dispute over the two hundred miles frontier of six Ulster counties is an attempt to magnify into a devastating deluge the slopping-over of an insignificant teacup. Unfortunately, even a small teacup can contain enough plague germs to decimate a nation, and rarely has a more deadly brew been concocted than that which seethes in the cauldron so diligently stirred by Great Britain, the Free State, and Northern Ireland. Like the "weird sisters" in *Macbeth*, they have spared no ingredient that might make the gruel thick and slab, feeding the pot lavishly with the accumulated passions and hatreds of three hundred years, seasoning the tragic clash of Gael and Gall with the newer feud of Orangeman and Nationalist, compounding sectarian resentments and political prejudices into a poisonous ferment.

Were no more than a boundary question involved, half a dozen reasonable men sitting round a table would have arrived at a working agreement after a few hours' discussion. As a matter of fact, the impossibility of the existing line of demarcation between Northern and Southern Ireland is freely admitted by all parties. It has every fault that a frontier could have, without a single compensating advantage. In its course of 240 miles it succeeds in ignoring any natural feature that might serve as a barrier. Practically all the river basins, except those of the Lagan and the Bann, are divided between the two Governments, and the coast-line shows similar absurdities. While Derry is in the Six Counties, its port (Moville) is controlled by the Free State; on the extreme south of Sir James Craig's enclave the same paradox is repeated with Newry and Carlingford. Donegal, the most northern county in the island, is officially part of Southern Ireland, and—to add to the irony of it—is connected with the Free State by a neck of land barely five miles wide which is not even traversed by a railway line. All railway communications between Donegal and the Free State run through Northern territory. The main railway system of the Six Counties

cuts the frontier of Southern Ireland at fifteen points; and in the Clones area the line doubles backwards and forwards across the border six times in a single section of seven miles! These complications and anomalies make things as difficult for Belfast as for Dublin, and each side protests that responsibility for the refusal to apply a remedy must be shouldered by its rival. The truth is that while North and South realize that revision is necessary, hitherto each has insisted that revision must be rigidly in accordance with its demands, and failing this is prepared to keep the millstone about its own neck in the belief that its neighbour will be the first to succumb under the burden.

This sorriest chapter in Irish political history would never have been written had any honest attempt been made to discuss the questions in dispute on their merits. Not merely was this plain duty evaded, but—stranger still for a race which prides itself upon its mastery of the art of politics—the crisis developed through the inability of leaders of all sections to think out in advance the implications of their policies. Originally, Partition was no more than a tactical side-issue in the Home Rule controversy; and when Sir Edward Carson clutched at it in the hope of thrusting a spoke into the wheel of the Asquith Bill, he had not the remotest idea that it was destined to dominate the strategical situation. The solution was a rank blasphemy against the Carsonite creed, as against that professed by the Nationalists. It was as the spokesman of the southern Unionists that Sir Edward Carson came to Belfast, and his crusade was based on the argument that while Ulster Unionists might be strong enough to secure terms for themselves, they were bound in honour to resist any settlement which would mean the isolation of their fellow-loyalists in the other provinces. The exclusion of the North was raised almost casually, as a debating point; and it is questionable if the Ulster leader would have pressed it—even as a debating point—had he not been convinced in his own mind that under no circumstances could the Redmondites afford to entertain the proposal. Theoretically, Sir Edward Carson was right; to Nationalists of all shades the idea of a sundered Ireland was anathema. Both sides, however, were to discover that in their eagerness to strike at each other they had released forces which, if permitted to prevail, would have brought in their train disasters even more irretrievable than the evils inherent in Partition.

There is little doubt that the Ulster leaders, when they called into being the Carsonite volunteers, laid their plans on the assumption that it would never come to fighting in earnest with the forces

of the Crown. But Nationalists blundered badly in denouncing the movement as a gigantic game of bluff. Long before the German rifles were smuggled into Larne under the nose of the British fleet, popular opinion in the North had been inflamed to a pitch that would have produced a conflagration had Home Rule been imposed on the province, even if Sir Edward Carson and his colleagues of the Ulster Provincial Government had taken the lead in striving to stamp out the flames. The situation was so serious that the Liberal Government had introduced an Amending Bill to provide for temporary exclusion by county option,—a solution which Sir Edward Carson rejected as tantamount to “a sentence of death, with stay of execution for five years.” At this critical juncture, the German invasion of Belgium made it possible for the British Government to postpone the application of the Home Rule Act. While the issue of peace and war in Europe hung in the balance, the Buckingham Palace Conference was called in the hope of effecting a compromise between Nationalists and Unionists. The Conference failed, but it was speedily known that the stumbling block was less exclusion than the scope of the area to be excluded. Henceforth though all concerned might protest their abhorrence of Partition, it was clear that—unlike the claimants in the judgment of Solomon—both sides were willing to have the living body dismembered, and were squabbling merely for the possession of an additional leg or arm.

The next phase, which proved to be a true turning-point in the long drawn out controversy, was ushered in by the 1916 Rebellion. This upheaval shattered the shibboleths and policies of all parties alike. It forced the British Government to see that their plan of putting Home Rule in cold storage for the term of the war, instead of ensuring peace, had resulted in confusion worse confounded. While this was an obvious conclusion, the task of conducting a world-wide struggle imposed so heavy a strain that Ministers, instead of bending their energies to deal manfully with their Irish difficulties, contented themselves with temporary readjustments, a piece of shortsightedness which however natural in the circumstances was destined in the long run to cost both countries dear.

To the North the Easter Week was no less a portent than to Dublin or London. One school of Unionist opinion held the view that the appeal to physical force was a blessing in disguise, inasmuch as it had revealed revolutionary Ireland to English eyes in its true light. These extremists rubbed their hands delightedly at the prospect of a period of Cromwellian dragooning, which they persuaded themselves would result in a new reconquest of the island

and the restoration of the long vanished glories of Ascendancy. Saner heads amongst the Orangemen, while equally insistent that coercion was the only cure, had their doubts as to whether Great Britain was in a position to administer the remedy in doses sufficiently strong for their purpose. They saw that the acceptance of the principle of self-determination was a dangerous if not a fatal obstacle to their hopes; and they also divined that the applause of Belfast would count for little in Downing Street if the enforcement of Carsonite policy meant that hostility to the Dublin Castle brand of Prussianism might prevent or even defer the entrance of America into the war. In face of these facts, the northern leaders began for the first time to consider in earnest the wisdom of cutting their losses, of not only leaving the southern Unionists to dree their own weird, but of jettisoning as much of the northern province as they could not safely hold by their own armed strength. This was desperately unpopular doctrine to preach in Ulster, and its advocates were fortunate in that they could represent to their followers that they consented to negotiate only under the strongest pressure from Westminster.

Nationalist politicians, or "parliamentarians"—as they now began to be called—had no third party upon whom they could saddle responsibility for making a deal upon a Partition basis. Yet a deal of this kind they felt to be inevitable, for Easter Week ended any hope that the Asquith Home Rule Act could be made law in the northern counties by consent. Redmond and his colleagues believed that whatever hope remained of retaining their prestige in the South depended upon their power to free themselves temporarily from the Ulster question. A proposal put forward by Mr. Lloyd George to enforce the Home Rule Act immediately, provided the six north-eastern counties were excluded from its operation, was accepted by a Convention of Ulster Nationalists upon the understanding that exclusion was to end automatically after six years. Sir Edward Carson, who had secured acceptance of this scheme from his organization after a hard fight, insisted that his reading of the terms was that the excluded area could not be included without a special Act of Parliament, and ultimately his interpretation was adopted by the Imperial Government, the good faith of whose leader was fiercely assailed by all Irish sections. Parliamentarianism by this failure had put its neck in the noose, and Sinn Fein lost no time in tightening the rope. Though a year later the Redmondites were still making a despairing bid to regain prestige by participating in the Irish Convention, their movement as a political force was dead.

In the southern provinces the elections of 1918 left Sinn Feiners everywhere masters of the field. They obtained their mandate largely because they insisted that they alone could defeat Partition, and unite North and South under a native Government. However excellent their intentions were, it soon became obvious even to their admirers that they no more than the Nationalists they had overthrown had evolved an Ulster policy in keeping with existing facts. They flattered themselves that by borrowing the Carsonite slogan "We won't have it" Partition would be made to share the fate of the Asquith Home Rule Act. While the Irish Convention was still in being, Mr. de Valera—speaking with all the authority attaching to his position as the Sinn Fein leader—declared at a by-election in South Armagh that if Ulster, as Unionists boasted, was a rock, he was prepared in the last resort to blast it out of his path. And he threatened Orangemen that if they refused to accept an Irish Republic they would be cleared out of the country, bag and baggage. Rarely have more disastrous consequences flowed from what was at the best a singularly stupid piece of platform braggadocio. The Orangemen knew as well as Mr. de Valera that he had no means of making good his words; but very naturally they decided that if the appeal was to be force, they would not be caught napping. At this time Sinn Fein was still committed to a policy of passive resistance, but its activists were soon to take matters out of the hands of their nominal leaders.

Undoubtedly militarist provocation on the British side did much to speed up the outbreak of guerilla hostilities in certain southern counties. But we know now that a handful of gunmen, like Dan Breen and his associates, stampeded Sinn Fein into war against its will. Until the last phase of the conflict, Dail Eireann never formally accepted responsibility for its war-makers, and its policy throughout was as haphazard and lacking in grip as that of Dublin Castle. It is questionable if any large proportion of Sinn Feiners, who acquiesced in the campaign against the forces of the British Crown, foresaw the possibility that Irishmen of another way of thinking would take a hand in the game on their own account. Yet from early in 1919 it was obvious that the most dangerous kinds of explosive material were accumulating in the northern counties. The first serious outbreak took place in Derry city in June of the following year, when rival mobs fought it out for the best part of a week with rifles and revolvers, while the military did little more than hold the ring. A month later came the wholesale expulsion of Catholic workers from Belfast shipyards and factories,—the prelude to two long years of sabotage, incendiarism

and bloodshed, which did more to divide Ireland into two nations than all the efforts of mischief-makers in two centuries. Northern Nationalists would have been less than human if they had not hit back, and Sinn Fein—whose activities were largely responsible for their plight—was bound in honour to help them with the hitting. But every blow struck in this hideous vendetta was another nail driven into the coffin of a united Ireland.

It was frankly on the two-nations basis that the British built their next attempt to deal with the political problem. In the mood which had developed in Ulster it would have been impossible to obtain consent for any arrangement that might have tempted Sinn Fein to enter into negotiations. By equipping the north-eastern counties with a parliament of their own, Mr. Lloyd George and his Ministers could flatter themselves that they had simplified the political issue without adding to their military difficulties. Once a Northern Government was in being, it could devise measures for its own defence, and Sinn Fein attacks upon it would no longer win the kind of sympathy that is given to a campaign by a small nation against a mighty empire. On the other hand, when it came to negotiations with the southern republicans, British politicians would be more free to bargain than if they had first to win Orange approval for their concessions. Though the Act of 1920 established separate parliaments with ludicrously restricted powers, it did not stereotype Partition, inasmuch as provision was made for representation of both Executives upon a Council of Ireland which, if North and South came to terms, could administer all Irish services. Had Irishmen been super-statesmen, they might have accepted this poor instalment in the hope of working gradually towards better things. In revolutionary crises, however, such piecemeal adjustments have no chance of being discussed on their merits. Southern Ireland rejected the offer with scorn, and turned with redoubled energy to physical force as its sole hope of salvation.

The North liked the Bill as little as its neighbour, though for very different reasons. Its demand had always been for the maintenance of the Act of Union, and any form of Irish self-government seemed to its people to entail a surrender of their position. To make the pill still more bitter, the Orangemen were informed by their leaders that it was necessary not only to leave Southern loyalists in the lurch, but to repudiate the Ulster Covenant by handing over the counties of Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan to the control of the Southern Executive. Sir Edward Carson ultimately convinced the Ulster Unionist Association that owing to the strength of the Nationalist minority it could not hope to administer an area larger

than six counties, but the decision was so unpalatable to the Orange rank and file that it terminated his career in Ulster leadership. There was no pretence that the Six Counties constituted a homogeneous area; on the contrary, it was notorious that in Fermanagh and Tyrone Nationalists outnumbered Unionists; and in Derry, Armagh and Down the border populations were opposed to a Belfast parliament. As Sinn Fein declined to discuss any solution that provided for the creation of two parliaments, and continued to pin its faith to the rifle and the boycott, it was obvious that the Belfast claim would prevail at Westminster, where members of all parties desired nothing more ardently than to get Ireland—or any part of Ireland—off their backs.

The formal opening of the first Northern parliament in July 1921 by King George in person was made the occasion of a new offer to the South. Unofficial negotiations had been in progress for some time previously behind the scenes, and had so far smoothed the way that within a week of the King's Speech hostilities were ended by a truce between the British authorities and Sinn Fein. Had the republican leaders taken the second step as promptly as the first, the country in all probability would have escaped evils that nearly completed its destruction. Unfortunately, Mr. de Valera's talent for metaphysical hair-splitting would not be denied, and—instead of days—months elapsed before direct discussions were opened by the despatch of an Irish delegation to London. At the outset the Truce had been enforced in the Six Counties by the withdrawal of the armed special constables from duty. And as the aimless exchanges between Dublin and London dragged on, the temperature in Belfast began to rise. Each side insists that the provocation came solely from its rival. According to Nationalists, Orange extremists, in the hope of wrecking the Truce and with it any possibility of an Irish settlement by consent, loosed their armed gangs in a new series of pogroms. Unionists contend that the cessation of hostilities in the South was followed by the flooding into their territory of hordes of Sinn Fein gunmen with a mandate to make it impossible for the Northern Government to function. Possibly the historian of the future will come to the conclusion that there was justification for the charges on both sides. At any rate it is clear that no real attempt was made by either set of Irish politicians to pave the way towards a friendly arrangement between their divided people. Coercion, not conciliation, was still the approved remedy. A deal with Great Britain was advocated in the South on the ground that it would enable pressure to be exercised more effectively against recalcitrant elements in the Six Counties,

and the Belfast parliament fought tooth and nail to wreck the proffered settlement, because it feared that it would be deprived of a weapon which it had imagined might restore Pitt's Union system in all its primitive rigour. Having failed to prevent the offer of Dominion status to the southern provinces, or to secure similar powers for the Northern Government, Sir James Craig took up the position that the allocation of territory as defined in the Act of 1920 could not be altered save with the consent of his parliament. To Mr. Lloyd George's declaration that if the Six Counties instead of entering the Irish Free State decided to remain subordinate to Westminster, Great Britain "would feel unable to defend the existing boundary which must be subject to revision on one side or the other," Belfast returned a flat refusal to have anything to do with the Boundary Commission, though its representatives condescended to recognize the Treaty to the extent of promptly taking advantage of the first clause of the border Article which enabled them to cut loose from the Free State.

For the Sinn Fein signatories, Article XII was the Achilles heel of the settlement. No explanations, however cogent or persuasive, could upset the fact that by it Partition was decreed, and could not be removed save by developing an entirely new line of approach. Unfortunately, the split in the Sinn Fein ranks destroyed any slender hope that might have existed of making a new beginning to end old quarrels. In much the same way as Sinn Fein in 1916 had used the cry of dividing Ireland to make the position of the parliamentarians impossible, so Mr. de Valera now seized upon it as a weapon with which he plumed himself he would wreck the Treaty as well as the Treatyites. His attitude was the more dishonest in that his own solution as set forth in *Document No. 2* was, line for line and letter for letter, that which he denounced as treason to the cause. To expose the insincerities and inconsistencies of the de Valera position was easy enough, but it did not minimise popular antagonism to a settlement which was a denial of Irish unity. In an evil moment for themselves, the Treatyites sought to placate resentment and outmanoeuvre the republicans by proclaiming that the application of Article XII would ensure the transfer of so much of northern territory to the Free State that Sir James Craig and his colleagues would find it impossible to administer the area remaining in their hands as a separate entity, and thus by a piece of legislative sleight of hand the whole Six Counties would be absorbed. Whatever capital may have been gained by this argument in the South, its effect in the North was to stiffen the determination of people and Government alike to resist any transfer

of territory, and day by day the fissure between the two communities steadily widened.

The outcome of civil war in Dublin necessarily postponed any attempts by the Free State to enforce its claim under the Boundary clause. Meanwhile the North took advantage of the respite to make its position impregnable against attack. There is no doubt that the great majority of Ulster Unionists believed the Free State would crumple under the blows rained upon it, and the Six Counties would have to reckon with a direct assault upon their territory by the victorious republicans. Nor was the campaign of loot and sabotage, to which the Irregulars devoted themselves after their failure in open fighting, calculated to soothe Orange fears or minimise opposition to an all-Ireland parliament. As Northern Nationalists repudiated allegiance to the Belfast Executive, they were technically in the same position as the Southern Irregulars, and Sir James Craig felt himself free to treat them as open and dangerous enemies. Hundreds were interned or driven into exile; oaths were imposed to make it impossible for members of the minority to hold public offices; local boards upon which they had majorities were dissolved, and by an elaborate gerrymandering of electoral areas the whole control of local government passed into Unionist hands. Meanwhile the armed gendarmerie, from whose ranks Nationalists were rigidly excluded, assumed the proportions of an army. At the present time Sir James Craig can put into the field 35,000 men who, while technically described as Special Constables, are really territorials capable of taking their place in the line with regular troops. It was not the least astute stroke of tactics on the part of Belfast Ministers that they have managed to make the Imperial parliament pay for the upkeep of the Specials, on the ground that their mobilization on a war footing is necessary to the maintenance of good order inside the Six Counties, while at the same time they assure their adherents that the force is in being to resist at the point of the bayonet, if necessary, any transfer of territory to the South in accordance with the findings of the Boundary Commission, though this transfer can become operative only by a decree of the British Government.

In the legal controversy Belfast also scored heavily by the decision of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council that the refusal of the Northern Government to appoint a representative necessitated supplementary legislation to enable British Ministers to constitute the Boundary Commission by nominating a third member. If popular opinion in the North raged fiercely against the passing of this Act, all sections in the South resented as fiercely,

and with better reason, the attempt of certain Conservative leaders—who had signed the Treaty of 1921—to lay down a one-sided interpretation of the Boundary clause which would have limited the authority of the Commissioners to a mere revision of the existing border line. These alarms and excursions, however, did not prevent the setting-up of the Boundary Commission in accordance with the terms of the Treaty, the only difference being that in addition to the Imperial Government's nominee, Mr. Justice Feetham, and the Free State's representative, Mr. Eoin MacNeill, the third Commissioner was appointed by the English Colonial Secretary instead of by the Northern Prime Minister. But the choice of Mr. J. R. Fisher, a member of the Ulster Unionist Council and one of the ablest of Ulster publicists, was a proof that though Sir James Craig might boycott the Commission, his interests would be vigilantly guarded. Before the end of 1924, members of the tribunal had made a preliminary tour of the border, and during the last six months they have been diligently collecting evidence in the disputed areas. While still refusing to take official cognisance of the Commission, the Northern Government left their adherents free to act in accordance with their own judgment, with the result that Unionist County Councils, Chambers of Commerce, and other organized bodies have been presenting cases to show why the districts for which they speak should not be transferred to the Free State.

People who are not ordinarily alarmists took it for granted that the setting-up of the Commission would be the signal for a shattering explosion. On the contrary, it has exercised a moderating influence, not so much by anything it has directly done, as by the growth of a consciousness on all sides that the underlying facts of the problem can no longer be disposed of by heroic gestures and full-blooded defiances. Sir James Craig insists, amidst approving cheers, that not a single "Special" shall be demobilized so long as he is responsible for the conduct of affairs. But he knows that the issue between the two Governments cannot be decided by Lancia cars and machine guns, and that to fling these into the scale would be disastrous not to one area but to both. While Belfast denies as strenuously as ever that the Boundary Commission can provide a solution, it has come to recognize that there is a question to be solved. Even Orange extremists, loudly as they thunder "Not an Inch" in public, freely admit in private that the transfer to the Free State of certain areas, which can be held only by military force at a ruinous cost, would strengthen instead of weakening the Six Counties. The Northern Prime Minister, indeed, makes it a virtue that he has always been ready to negotiate directly with

President Cosgrave for a settlement by consent, and suggests that in urging a deal between Irish sections without British intervention he is upholding a fundamental principle of Sinn Fein against Sinn Feiners. This is an excellent debating point; but until Sir James Craig can convince his opponents, which he has hitherto failed to do, that his object is to arrange a settlement and not merely to exercise a veto against any modification of the *status quo*, this net will be spread in vain before Free Staters.

Had the Belfast Cabinet given any indication of the districts which it was prepared to lop off, a possible basis of discussion might have been provided. Unfortunately, throughout the long controversy the aim of all sides has been less to clear a safe path for themselves than to pile up obstacles over which their opponents would break their shins or, preferably, their necks. The task of distributing areas in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, complicated as it is, demanded above all things a measure of good will, and hitherto those on both sides who urged good will have had no chance against advocates of what Mr. Galsworthy calls "the skin game". Yet it is impossible to deny that the situation is changing, when a paper as uncompromisingly Partitionist as *The Northern Whig* declares that "the best hope for the future lies not in attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable, or to work for a conformity which is neither possible nor desirable, but to cultivate the feelings of mutual respect and tolerance which are quite compatible with the permanent existence in Northern and Southern Ireland of forms of government inspired by different ideals." With the development of mutual respect and tolerance many differences that now assume mountainous proportions will diminish into insignificant molehills.

In the South the border difficulty, which not so long ago blackened the whole political horizon, is shrinking to its true dimensions. The ordinary Free Stater realizes at last that, whatever the Boundary Commission does or leaves undone, the real issue between the two States cannot be settled by legislative compulsion. Diplomacy may delimit areas, but co-operation between these areas depends upon the eradication of prejudices and passions that in recent years have been cultivated as zealously as if they were the supreme political virtues. It is much easier to sow seeds of this kind than to uproot them, but a good deal has already been done, and it is a hopeful sign that we are beginning to be more concerned about our own shortcomings than about our neighbour's defects. Partition will end, said the Free State Minister of Defence recently, when the people on both sides are willing to end it, and he urged that the

right way to bring this day nearer was for Free Staters to till their garden so well that the North would look enviously over the hedge. Even twelve months ago this commonplace would have seemed the most revolutionary of paradoxes, and the odds are that its author would have been branded as a traitor to the cause.

We pride ourselves upon our mental quickness in Ireland. Yet in this matter which is of such vital importance to our future peace and prosperity we have consistently risked the substance to clutch at shadows. Since Partition was first decreed, no organized body of opinion in Ireland, from the heads of various Churches to commercial travellers and Rugby footballers, has met in conclave without protesting that as far as its members are concerned no cleavage exists between North and South. In other countries political boundaries have been constructed so as to prevent the clash of rival social and economic systems. We, on the other hand, have permitted ourselves to become so obsessed by what are relatively slight differences in party politics that we make a burnt-offering of social and economic unity in their honour. This is not wholly the fault of the politicians, as not a few Irishmen in both camps are now whispering; it is due directly to the view almost universal amongst us that patriotism is the humble handmaiden of party politics. Tragical as is the separation between North and South, it was inevitable from their record during the last generation that the only hope they will ever work together is that each should be free to work apart.