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Home Rule: The Liberal Party's Quest to Pacify Ireland

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HOME RULE: THE QUEST TO PACIFY IRELAND

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Abstract: This paper examines a period in Irish history when the Liberal Party of the United Kingdom attempted to grant Home Rule to Ireland. From 1801 to 1922, what today is the Republic of Ireland was one of four countries which constituted the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. From the 1860s to the 1910s, Irish nationalists pushed for a policy known as Home Rule in order to devolve lawmaking authority from the British Parliament in London to a new Irish Parliament in Dublin. This dramatic change in the United Kingdom's constitutional structure would have kept Ireland in the UK, but the Irish people would have enjoyed greater control over their country's internal affairs. This paper will explain why Home Rule never came to pass despite the Liberal Party's multiple efforts to make it a reality, resulting in the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War.

To William Ewart Gladstone, Hawarden Castle was not just a home. Situated comfortably in the Welsh countryside, far removed from the bustling metropolitan world of Westminster, Hawarden Castle was a sanctuary where Gladstone found the physical and intellectual strength to serve four terms as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. A majestic estate surrounded by miles of lush woodlands and rolling green fields, Hawarden Castle was where Gladstone returned time and again to immerse himself in his vast personal library and chop down mighty Welsh oak trees with the energy of a man half his age. Hailed by his supporters as the “Grand Old Man” of British politics, when Gladstone entered his fourth term at the age of eighty-two he was the oldest person ever to serve as Britain's Prime Minister — a record that he continues to hold today.² During the twelve years when he shifted worlds between Number 10 Downing Street and Hawarden Castle, Gladstone implemented landmark social

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² Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 460.

reforms which changed the face of Britain. Gladstone introduced secret voting, disestablished the Church of Ireland, and recognized the right of trade unions to organize. When he left public life and retired to Hawarden Castle in 1895, Britain was a more free and equal place because of William Ewart Gladstone.

Although Gladstone's legacy includes these lasting legislative accomplishments, his most ambitious proposal — a plan to introduce Home Rule in Ireland — ended in failure. Upon his appointment as Prime Minister in 1868, Gladstone declared that, “my mission is to pacify Ireland.”³ For eighty-five years, Ireland had been part of the United Kingdom. But it lacked direct authority over its own domestic affairs, which were controlled by the British Parliament in London. In 1886, Gladstone introduced a policy known as Home Rule in order to grant Ireland greater self-governance. Home Rule would have kept Ireland within the United Kingdom, but Ireland would have been given direct authority over its own internal affairs through the creation of a new Irish Parliament in Dublin. In 1886 and 1893, Gladstone attempted to pass Home Rule legislation. After Gladstone's proposals were defeated in Parliament, his Liberal Party took up the fight for Home Rule again under Prime Minister H.H. Asquith. A Home Rule bill was finally passed in 1914, yet the outbreak of World War I prevented its implementation. The Home Rule movement collapsed in the aftermath of Britain's unpopular reaction to the 1916 Easter Rising, and it would take a two-year war of independence for Britain to accept the existence of an Irish Parliament. Home Rule was a noble attempt to “pacify Ireland,” but it failed due to opposition from British and Irish unionists, the stubbornness of the House of Lords, and the Easter Rising.⁴

³ Elizabeth Newmarch, “The Irish Answer,” *Gladstone's Library*, May 1, 2018.

⁴ Newmarch, “The Irish Answer.”

British rule in Ireland began during the reign of King Henry II of England. In 1169, Norman troops invaded Ireland in order to help a deposed Irish king reclaim his throne.⁵ Two years later, King Henry II landed in Ireland with an army of four thousand men to bring the country under his domain instead.⁶ Over the next six centuries England strengthened its control over the Emerald Isle through treaties and wars of counter-rebellion, culminating in the creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801. When it joined the United Kingdom, Ireland was made up of thirty-two counties. Twenty-six counties, mostly in the south and northwest, were majority Catholic while six counties in the northeastern region of Ulster were majority Protestant. Nineteenth-century Ireland suffered from a stratified social structure that was divided as much by religion as it was by wealth. Although Protestants were a minority in Ireland as a whole, they made up the majority of the Irish ruling class and only Protestants could serve in Parliament. Jay P. Dolan explains that by, “the end of the eighteenth century Irish Catholics owned only 5 percent of Ireland’s land,” and this vast disparity in land ownership along religious lines created a wealthy Protestant Ascendancy which dominated Ireland politically and economically at the expense of the country’s impoverished Catholic tenant farmers.⁷ Although Britain allowed Catholics to serve in Parliament in 1829, Parliament continued to pass laws which reinforced Ireland’s social, political, and economic inequities.

The outbreak of the Great Famine in 1845 was a crucial turning point in the relationship between Britain and Ireland. After a blight infected Ireland’s potato crops, Ireland lost one third of its population through death and emigration in a matter of five years.⁸ Ireland actually had a

⁵ Geoffrey Barrow, “Scotland, Wales and Ireland in the Twelfth Century,” *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. David Luscombe and Jonathan Riley-Smith, Vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 608.

⁶ Barrow, “Scotland, Wales and Ireland in the Twelfth Century.”

⁷ Jay P. Dolan, *The Irish Americans: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 6.

⁸ William G. Powderly, “How Infection Shaped History: Lessons From The Irish Famine,” *Transactions of the American Clinical and Climatological Association* 130 (2019): 127-135.

food surplus during the Great Famine, but most of that food was exported to Britain instead of being used to feed the Irish people, and the British government did little to provide relief to a starving population. In the 1860s, with Ireland still reeling from the long-term effects of the Great Famine, Irish nationalists began pushing for a dramatic new change in the United Kingdom's constitutional structure. Although most Irish nationalists wanted to stay in the United Kingdom, they also wanted to shift control of Ireland's domestic affairs from the British Parliament in London to a new Irish Parliament in Dublin. This policy was known as Home Rule. The idea behind Home Rule was simple. Ireland would stay in the United Kingdom and it would continue to send representatives to the British Parliament, but it would also have a local legislature of its own. The British government would still have ultimate authority over Ireland, but the Irish Parliament would have the power to write and enforce Ireland's domestic legislation. This would have been similar to the relationship between the United States' federal government and its individual state governments, which can pass their own internal laws despite the fact that America's national government in Washington, DC is supreme over the states.

Although Gladstone would eventually become Britain's leading champion of Home Rule, he did not support the measure until he was forced to do so by political circumstances. In the lead-up to the 1885 British general election, when Gladstone was seeking a third term as Prime Minister, Home Rule was adamantly advocated by an Anglo-Irish Protestant from Cork named Charles Stewart Parnell. An eloquent aristocrat with a large bushy beard whose boundless charisma made him a favorite of Irish nationalists, Parnell founded the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1882 in order to transform the growing Home Rule movement into an organized political force. Under Parnell's leadership, the IPP quickly became the most popular political party in Ireland, yet without a majority in the British Parliament Parnell had no hope of passing a Home Rule bill unless he allied with either the Liberals or the Conservatives.

At first, it was not obvious that Parnell would join forces with Gladstone. Gladstone was a classical liberal who believed in free trade, social equality, and individual liberty, but his record on civil rights left much to be desired. The vast family fortune which allowed Gladstone to live in luxury at Hawarden Castle was derived in no small part from his father's usage of slavery on sugar plantations in the British West Indies. The younger Gladstone supported the abolition of slavery when he first ran for Parliament in 1832, but he campaigned on gradual rather than immediate emancipation. Parliament passed a bill providing for the gradual emancipation of slaves in 1833, with slave owners being handsomely compensated, and it was Gladstone's own father who received the highest compensation package out of any slave owner in Britain.⁹ During a speech in Newcastle, England in 1862, Gladstone argued that Britain should intervene in the American Civil War by mediating a peace settlement between the Union and the Confederacy.¹⁰ Because British public opinion strongly supported the Union, Gladstone had to immediately backtrack his comments by emphasizing his firm opposition to slavery and the Confederacy.¹¹

Over the course of his tenure as Prime Minister, Gladstone would emerge from his father's shadow — and his own problematic past — to become a beloved figure lionized by working class voters as “the people's William” in spite of his privileged background.¹² While his father had been content to profit from the suffering and enslavement of other human beings, William Gladstone was driven by a powerful sense of justice that led him to make the United

⁹ Nick Bourne and Oliver Slow, “William Gladstone's family to apologize for slavery links,” *BBC*, August 20, 2023.

¹⁰ “Mr. Gladstone Defines His Position More Clearly.; Correspondence With Mr. Mosley of Manchester, Members of Parliament on the Topic. The Voice of the Conservatives. Tone of the Press. Emissary Mason on Recognition. The Blockade of Bermuda. The Movements of Alabama,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 1862.

¹¹ Mr. Gladstone Defines His Position More Clearly.; Correspondence With Mr. Mosley of Manchester, Members of Parliament on the Topic. The Voice of the Conservatives. Tone of the Press. Emissary Mason on Recognition. The Blockade of Bermuda. The Movements of Alabama.”

¹² Andrew Adonis, “The people's William,” *Prospect Magazine*, July 4, 2009.

Kingdom more democratic. In addition to expanding the franchise and reapportioning seats in the House of Commons to be more equal in population size, Gladstone reformed Ireland's land laws in order to expand Catholic access to land ownership. He also disestablished the Irish branch of the Anglican Church, which had long been the state church of Ireland despite the country's Catholic majority. These changes helped bridge the divide between Catholics and Protestants, but they did not go far enough to silence nationalist calls for Home Rule. As the IPP grew in strength, the stage was set for a confrontation between Parnell and Gladstone.

Gladstone's second term as Prime Minister came to an abrupt end in June 1885 when his budget proposal was defeated in the House of Commons by an alliance of Conservatives and the IPP. Gladstone was compelled to resign, allowing the Conservatives to form a minority government under the Marquess of Salisbury. Gladstone's entire future in politics now hung in the balance and Parnell saw an opportunity to extract Home Rule from a war-weary veteran of the political battlefield. Without a majority in Parliament, Salisbury was forced to call a general election which lasted from November to December 1885. Although the Liberals won a plurality of seats in the House of Commons, they came seventeen seats short of a majority.¹³ Parnell had carried the IPP to a relatively strong showing with eighty-six seats, allowing him to play the role of kingmaker.¹⁴ With the Liberals and the Conservatives eager to form a majority with the help of Irish MPs, Parnell offered to support either party if they promised to enact Home Rule.

Gladstone was hesitant to accept Parnell's offer. The reason that Gladstone was out of power in the first place was that his government had been toppled by Parnell's opposition to the 1885 budget, so Gladstone distrusted Parnell at the outset. Yet Gladstone also recognized that gaining the IPP's support was his only hope of returning to Number 10 Downing Street. After

¹³ Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 520.

¹⁴ Jenkins, *Gladstone: A Biography*.

carefully contemplating his options, Gladstone became attracted to Home Rule when he realized that it just might be the bold stroke which he needed to finally “pacify Ireland.”¹⁵ Gladstone rolled the dice. He accepted Parnell’s offer of a coalition between the Liberals and the IPP. In exchange, he announced his support for Home Rule in February 1886. The IPP joined with the Liberals in forming a government, allowing Gladstone to become Prime Minister for a third time, and Gladstone introduced his first Home Rule bill to the House of Commons on April 8, 1886.

Unionists in both Britain and Ireland — particularly in Ulster — were horrified by Gladstone’s proposal. In Ireland, Protestant unionists jeered Home Rule as “Rome Rule” because they believed that an Irish Parliament would be dominated by the Catholic Church.¹⁶ To unionists in Britain, Home Rule was an affront not just to the Union between Britain and Ireland but to the British Empire itself. They feared that if Ireland were given its own Parliament, then so would England, Scotland, and Wales. The inevitable next step would be independence not just for Ireland but for Britain’s colonies in Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and India. Liberal MP Joseph Chamberlain of Birmingham so opposed Home Rule that he broke from Gladstone to form the Liberal Unionist Party, splitting the Liberals in two with another general election just months away.

Perhaps no Member of Parliament was more vocal in his opposition to Home Rule than Lord Randolph Churchill. Predicting that the Liberals would lose the next general election if Gladstone’s Home Rule bill failed, Churchill planned on replacing Salisbury as Conservative Leader were their party to win the election. Churchill’s cynicism was laid bare when he told Lord Justice FitzGibbon that, “the Orange card would be the one to play,” against the Liberals in

¹⁵ Elizabeth Newmarch, “The Irish Answer,” *Gladstone’s Library*, May 1, 2018.

¹⁶ Terence A.M. Dooley, “Why Monaghan Protestants Opposed Home Rule,” *Clogher Record*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1993, 43, <https://doi-org.proxygw.wrlc.org/10.2307/27699359>.

1886 — invoking the Protestant Orangemen of Ulster who looked to William of Orange as their hero.¹⁷ Giddy at the prospect of a fight with Gladstone, Churchill stirred the British public against Home Rule with the provocative slogan, “Ulster will fight, Ulster will be right.”¹⁸ Although Churchill was an opportunist with his sights set squarely on Number 10, he spoke for millions of people in the United Kingdom who genuinely feared the potential ramifications of Home Rule.

Torn asunder by Liberal Unionists and Conservatives alike, the first Home Rule bill failed in the House of Commons. Gladstone’s Liberals were decimated in the general election of 1886, and Chamberlain’s Liberal Unionists joined Salisbury’s second government in a coalition which commanded a massive Parliamentary majority. Most politicians would have been removed from their party’s leadership after such a humiliating defeat. Yet Gladstone’s years of loyal service to the Liberals earned him the support of most Liberal MPs, allowing him to cling onto the Liberal leadership. When he returned to the House of Commons as Leader of the Opposition, Gladstone was received by Liberals as a hero while Chamberlain was shunned as an apostate. James Louis Garvin notes that when Gladstone walked down the floor of the Commons, “wild cheers for Gladstone were followed by a storm of hate against Chamberlain,” who was shouted down by Liberal MPs as, ““Traitor! Judas!””¹⁹ For his part, Churchill lost his gambit to become Prime Minister. Instead of replacing Salisbury after the election, he was forced to resign his cabinet post and he died of syphilis eight years later. He was only forty-five years old.

At the age of eighty-two, Gladstone returned to Number 10 in 1892. The previous year, Parnell died of pneumonia after his affair with an Irish MP’s wife split the IPP and ruined his

¹⁷ “Lord Randolph Churchill - Oxford Reference,” *Oxford Reference*, 2017.

¹⁸ William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill: Visions of Glory, 1874-1932* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1983), 454.

¹⁹ James Louis Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, Volume 2: 1885-1895: Disruption and Combat* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 250.

reputation. Yet even with Parnell gone and the IPP divided, Gladstone guided a second Home Rule bill to passage in the House of Commons — only for it to be blocked by the House of Lords. Jenkins describes Britain’s unelected upper chamber of Parliament as being dominated by unionist Lords who shared the view that, “the Irish had no taste for justice, common sense, moderation or national prosperity and looked only to perpetual strife and dissension.”²⁰ For all of Gladstone’s political prowess, there was little he could do to convince a recalcitrant House of Lords to pass Home Rule. The Lords rejected Gladstone’s second Home Rule bill by a wide margin, and Gladstone resigned the premiership of the United Kingdom for the final time in 1894.²¹ The following year Salisbury led his party to another electoral triumph with the support of Liberal Unionists, who continued to politically benefit from their opposition to Home Rule.

After more than a decade in the political wilderness, the Liberals returned to power when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman became Prime Minister in 1905. Campbell-Bannerman advocated a cautious “step by step approach” to Home Rule, and he did not propose a Home Rule bill during his brief premiership.²² When Campbell-Bannerman resigned due to ill health in 1908, he was succeeded by Chancellor of the Exchequer H.H. Asquith. An accomplished barrister from a well-established Yorkshire family, Asquith had been on the front lines of Gladstone’s 1893 fight for Home Rule during his time as Britain’s Home Secretary. Renowned as, “one of the best public speakers of his generation,” Asquith was lauded by his admirers as, “the Last of the Romans.”²³ Like Caesar before his descent into despotism, Asquith’s government was a great triumvirate of himself, Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George, and President of the Board of Trade Winston Churchill. Nicknamed the “Welsh

²⁰ Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 553.

²¹ Jenkins, *Gladstone: A Biography*, 606.

²² “Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified September 3, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Campbell-Bannerman>.

²³ Lester, V. Markham, *H.H. Asquith: Last of the Romans* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 145, 343.

Wizard,” Lloyd George was a masterful orator whose legendary rhetorical skills more than outmatched his slight 5’6” frame.²⁴ When Labour politician Tony Benn described meeting Lloyd George as a boy in 1937, he remarked, “I mean talk about charisma, the man absolutely radiated it.”²⁵ Winston Churchill, the son of Lord Randolph Churchill, had been a rising star in British politics since his miraculous escape from an enemy camp during the Second Boer War made him a national hero. Flanked by outstanding government ministers and equipped with a large Liberal majority in the House of Commons, Asquith seemed ideally suited to make Home Rule a reality.

Like Gladstone and Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith did not initially press for Home Rule. During his first term Ireland was placed on the backburner while Asquith prioritized the Liberal vision of a welfare state where children, the elderly, labor, and the sick would find a helping hand in the British government. As much as Asquith wanted to avoid getting involved with Irish politics, he was forced to back Home Rule in order to save his entire ministry from collapse. In 1909, Asquith put forward a revolutionary proposal known as the People’s Budget. Devised by Lloyd George and Churchill, the plan called for tax increases on income and land in order to finance Liberal welfare programs. With the Liberals holding an overwhelming advantage in the House of Commons, the People’s Budget easily passed the lower chamber of Parliament.

Yet one thing stood in Asquith’s path: the House of Lords, the same institution which torpedoed Home Rule in 1893. Aristocratic Lords howled at the prospect of having to pay higher taxes to finance government welfare programs. Even Liberal Lords such as Lord Rosebery, who briefly succeeded Gladstone as Prime Minister in 1894, opposed the People’s Budget on the

²⁴ Claire Price, “A Welsh Wizard is 75; Lloyd George, Who Led the British to Victory In the World War, Has Never Ceased Fighting,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 1938.

²⁵“From Llanystumdwy to 10 Downing Street,” *BBC News*, July 19, 2006.

grounds that it was, “pure socialism... and the end of all, the negation of faith, of family, of property, of Monarchy, of Empire.”²⁶ In November 1909 the House of Lords rejected the People’s Budget, the first time the Lords had ever rejected a budget in the entire history of the United Kingdom. Asquith was forced to call a general election in order to seek a popular mandate to overrule the Lords. In the election of January 1910, the Liberals just barely scraped by when it won a plurality of only two seats.²⁷ Yet the Conservatives had actually won the overall popular vote, and no party had a Parliamentary majority.²⁸

Like Gladstone in 1886, a desperate Asquith was forced to turn to the IPP. And like Charles Stewart Parnell, IPP leader John Redmond would get to decide who held the keys to Number 10. The Liberals were so badly damaged by the election that in order to remain in office, Asquith needed to build an alliance with MPs from the nascent Labour Party and the IPP. Redmond made it clear that the price to be paid for this alliance was Home Rule. Having been left with no choice but to strike a deal with Redmond, Asquith finally acquiesced to Home Rule. Redmond gave his support to the Liberal government, and in return Asquith promised to propose a third Home Rule bill. Bucking to pressure to pass a budget supported by the majority of Britain’s political parties, the Lords withdrew their veto in April 1910 and the People’s Budget became law. Nevertheless, the Lords were certain to veto a third Home Rule bill. The only way around this would be to weaken the Lords’ ability to veto legislation passed by the Commons, forcing Asquith to call yet another general election for December 1910. The results were even closer than in January, with the Liberals coming just one seat ahead of the Conservatives, but the British people had given Asquith a mandate to reform the House of Lords with the support of

²⁶ “The People’s Budget,” *Spartacus Educational*, n.d.

²⁷ V. Markham Lester, *H.H. Asquith: Last of the Romans* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 159.

²⁸ Lester, *H.H. Asquith: Last of the Romans*.

Labour and the IPP.²⁹ The Commons passed the Parliament Act of 1911, which stated that the Lords could veto most bills for a maximum of two years. After King George V threatened to pack the House of Lords with new Liberal peers if they did not pass the bill, the Parliament Act of 1911 passed the upper chamber of Parliament by seventeen votes.³⁰

In April 1912, following through on his promise to Redmond, Asquith proposed the Government of Ireland Act. The bill would have created a bicameral Irish Parliament while simultaneously reducing the number of Ireland's MPs in the British Parliament. After the bill was passed by the Commons, Home Rule was again shot down by the Lords. The Commons passed Home Rule again in 1913, but the Lords vetoed the bill a second time. The Liberals pushed on, passing Home Rule in the Commons again in 1914 only for the House of Lords to reject the bill once more. By this point the Government of Ireland Act had been passed by the Commons for two years, meaning that the Commons could override the Lords and submit the bill for the King's approval. In September 1914 the bill received King George V's Royal Assent and became law. At long last, Home Rule had finally been achieved — or so it seemed.

Just as the fierce opposition of British and Irish unionists defeated the first Home Rule bill in 1886, militant unionism threatened to derail Home Rule in 1914. While the debate over Asquith's Home Rule bill was in its final stages, it appeared that civil war was imminent. Leader of the Opposition Andrew Bonar Law denounced the bill and openly supported Ulster Protestants who planned to violently rebel against the British government if Home Rule were implemented. After Irish unionists Sir Edward Carson and James Craig created the Ulster Volunteer Force to prevent the implementation of Home Rule in Ulster through military force, British army officers in the region mutinied to protest Home Rule during the Curragh Mutiny of

²⁹ Lester, *H.H. Asquith: Last of the Romans*, 169.

³⁰ Lester, 170.

1914. With Ireland on the brink of civil war, Asquith proposed an Amending Bill that would have temporarily excluded Ulster from Home Rule while allowing the rest of the country to be governed by an Irish Parliament in Dublin.

Asquith's compromise might have worked if not for World War I. On July 28, 1914 Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. On August 1 Germany declared war on France and Russia, then it invaded Belgium the next day. This was a blatant violation of the Treaty of London which guaranteed Belgium's neutrality. Germany, when it was still a Confederation led by Prussia, had signed that treaty in 1839 along with the United Kingdom. Under the terms of the treaty, its signatories were obligated to militarily intervene against another power if it violated Belgian neutrality. Germany did not need to invade Belgium, which had no involvement whatsoever in Ferdinand's death. Yet after Russia mobilized its troops to protect Serbia, and after France mobilized its troops to support Russia, Germany decided to declare war not only on Russia but also on France. Fearing the formidable French defenses along the German border, the German army chose to attack France by crossing through Belgium first rather than invading France directly.

When Asquith's government protested this gross infraction of international law, German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg scoffed that the Treaty of London was nothing more than, "a scrap of paper."³¹ On August 4, Britain responded to the Kaiserreich's arrogance by declaring war on Germany. After the Government of Ireland Act was given Royal Assent in September 1914, Asquith decided to suspend the bill for the duration of World War I. This was in line with political custom in Britain, where constitutional issues were traditionally put on hold during wartime. It was also a fateful mistake that caused profound damage to the Home Rule

³¹ Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (New York: NYU Press, 2004), 43.

movement. Asquith, like most British leaders, believed that the First World War would be a short one. Based on this assumption, he thought it would be prudent to suspend Home Rule while Britain focused its energies on fighting Germany. But the war quickly descended into grueling trench warfare that lasted until November 1918, costing the British Empire over nine hundred thousand lives — more than twenty-seven thousand of which were Irish.³²

Initially, most people in Ireland supported the British war effort. Even Irish nationalists were outraged by the German army's aggression against Belgium, particularly the burning of Louvain which had close historic ties to Ireland. Through his leadership of the Irish Volunteers, created in 1913 to counter the rise of the Ulster Volunteer Force, Redmond called for the Irish to enlist in the British Expeditionary Forces. Yet by 1916, support for Ireland's participation in the war diminished as the conflict ground to a stalemate on the Western Front. With the Great War raging on with no end in sight, a nationalist political party called Sinn Féin grew in popular appeal. Sinn Féin argued that rather than settling for Home Rule, Ireland should become a republic and declare outright independence from the United Kingdom. Despite the horrors of the Great War, support for independence continued to be a minority viewpoint in Ireland. In fact, the Irish people would likely have accepted Home Rule after the end of World War I in 1918 if not for the British government's unpopular response to a doomed rebellion in the spring of 1916.

On Easter Monday in April 1916, a poet named Patrick Pearse led a small army of rebels to Dublin where they seized control of the General Post Office and declared independence from the United Kingdom. Although Pearse hoped to facilitate a general uprising throughout the rest of the county, most people in Ireland sided against the rebels and they supported remaining in the United Kingdom. Without outside assistance, Pearse had no chance against the thousands of

³² John Dorney, "Ireland and the First World War - A Brief Overview," *The Irish Story*, November 9, 2018.

British troops who marched into Dublin and crushed the rebellion after only five days of fighting. On the penultimate day of the Easter Rising, General John Maxwell arrived in Dublin as Ireland's new military governor. Maxwell responded to the rebellion with a sadistic campaign of revenge that violated basic legal rights and civil liberties. On Maxwell's watch more than thirty-five hundred people in Ireland were arrested,³³ at least eighteen hundred were imprisoned in a so-called "internment camp" in Wales,³⁴ and over two hundred were court-martialed.³⁵ Maxwell saw to it that defendants were tried in secret without counsel, and he ordered the executions of fifteen people who had not even been convicted by a jury.³⁶

As a result of the British government's brutal response to the Easter Rising, Irish public opinion turned against Home Rule in favor of outright independence from Great Britain. Redmond's IPP deputy John Dillon angrily lashed out at Asquith on the floor of the House of Commons, saying that initially, "the great bulk of the population were not favourable to the insurrection," but now, "what is happening is that thousands of people in Dublin, who ten days ago were bitterly-opposed to the whole of the Sinn Fein movement and to the rebellion, are now becoming infuriated against the Government on account of these executions."³⁷ To many people in Ireland, life after the Easter Rising gave legitimacy to what nationalists had been saying for decades: Ireland must be able to govern itself. But Irish nationalists were no longer content with Home Rule. Instead, they wanted independence from Britain, and they were willing to die for it.

Under fire from all sides for his inept leadership of Britain's war effort, Asquith was forced out of office in December 1916 and replaced by Lloyd George. The new Prime Minister

³³ "Irish politics regarding union and independence, 1913 – 1949," *State Library Victoria*, 2016.

³⁴ Maev Kennedy, "Welsh Village summons ghosts of Ireland's revolutionary past," *The Guardian*, December 27, 2015.

³⁵ Brian Barton, "The secret court martial records of the Easter Rising," *The History Press*, n.d.

³⁶ "Aftermath - Easter 1916: Rebellion and Memory in Ireland," *KU Libraries*, The University of Kansas, n.d.

³⁷ "Continuance of Martial Law," *Hansard 1803-2005*, May 11, 1916.

hoped to salvage Home Rule by brokering a compromise with the nationalists and unionists, but by then it was too late. Most people in Ireland wanted to leave the United Kingdom. In the general election of December 1918, the IPP was wiped out by Sinn Féin. Instead of taking seats in the British Parliament, Sinn Féin formed a new Parliament in Dublin called the Dáil Éireann. Refusing to recognize the Dáil Éireann, Britain attempted to reassert its control over Ireland during the Irish War of Independence from 1919 to 1921. After the war's conclusion, Ireland was granted dominion status within the British Commonwealth and Britain accepted the existence of the Dáil Éireann as the official legislature of the Irish Free State. However, many Irish nationalists were angered when the Anglo-Irish Treaty forced the Dáil Éireann to swear an oath of loyalty to Britain. The treaty also partitioned Ireland so that Ulster's six majority Protestant counties remained in the United Kingdom, while Ireland's other twenty-six counties became part of the Irish Free State. The partition of Ireland and its lack of full independence facilitated a civil war that caused more deaths than the War of Independence itself. The Irish Free State was replaced by the Republic of Ireland in 1937, and in 1949 the Irish Republic declared itself to be fully independent from Britain. Across the border in Northern Ireland, Ulster's internal tensions over its own status in the United Kingdom would be unresolved for another five decades.

Irish Home Rule failed for four overarching reasons. The first was the uncompromising opposition from unionists who defeated Home Rule in 1886 and fanned the flames of civil war in 1914. The second was the House of Lords which blocked Home Rule in 1893 and delayed the passage of the Government of Ireland Act until 1914. The third was World War I, which caused Asquith to suspend the implementation of Home Rule after it had already been passed. The fourth was the British government's response to the 1916 Easter Rising, which turned the Irish people in favor of outright independence from Britain. Had any one of these factors not stood in

its way, Home Rule could have become a reality. When Gladstone died at Hawarden Castle, the home and sanctuary which stood at the center of his political career, he had failed in his quest to “pacify Ireland.”³⁸ Following the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War, Ireland would continue to be devastated by violent tensions between nationalists and unionists. Although Gladstone’s dream of an Ireland at peace had been defeated, it did not die. In the end, it thrived. One hundred years after Gladstone’s death, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement finally brought the lasting peace to Ireland which the Liberal Party had fought so hard to achieve.

³⁸ Elizabeth Newmarch, “The Irish Answer,” *Gladstone’s Library*, May 1, 2018.

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