

A union severed? Loyalists in Ulster's 'lost counties', 1922-1927

Jack Hepworth

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Founded one century ago, the Irish Free State was established as a Dominion of the British Commonwealth under the crown. Comprising twenty-six of the island's thirty-two counties, the Free State had a primarily Catholic populace: according to the first census, in 1926, Protestants represented a mere 7 percent of the 3 million-strong population. For the predominantly unionist Protestant minority, the Free State's formal separation from Britain prompted difficult political questions. What did it mean to be a 'unionist' or a 'loyalist' after Ireland's relationship with Britain had been so profoundly redefined?

The sense of dislocation was especially acute in the Free State border counties of Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan. Historically part of the ancient province of Ulster, these three counties were home to some 70,000 Protestants. A decade earlier, in 1912, approximately half of those Protestants had signed Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant, pledging to resist Home Rule 'by all means necessary'. Yet by the turn of the 1920s, after a modified Home Rule settlement created two parliaments on the island of Ireland, they found themselves outside of the United Kingdom's jurisdiction. How would unionists in these 'lost counties' navigate their political displacement?

Ulster partitioned

On 10 March 1920, approximately 1,000 delegates of the Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) convened in Belfast's Ulster Hall. Representatives from all nine counties of the historic province met against the backdrop of a fierce guerrilla conflict between the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and crown forces. Just six months earlier, David Lloyd George's Westminster government had finally vowed to implement Home Rule for all Ireland. In response, unionist stalwart Walter Long, who chaired the cabinet's committee on Ireland, proposed creating two Home Rule parliaments on a partitioned island. With such seismic reconfiguration being debated, the unionists of the north-east of Ireland gathered to discuss their future.

The UUC meeting addressed a key strategic dilemma: if there were to be two parliaments, how would unionists – a minority on the island as a whole, but a majority in its north-eastern quarter – best safeguard their interests? The Ulster Hall conference was to prove as pivotal as it was bitter. Following the lead of the Belfast unionist grandee Sir James Craig, the UUC leadership sensationally proposed that to concentrate and maximise their political strength, northern unionists should vie for a truncated six-county parliament. Protestants constituted much smaller proportions of the population in Donegal (approximately one-fifth) and Monaghan (one-quarter). Craig had already told the House of Commons that it would be 'absolutely impossible' to govern a northern polity which included those counties' Catholic majorities. Despite vociferous protests from the Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan delegates, a majority of UUC representatives settled hard-headedly upon cleaving the three counties from what was to become Northern Ireland. In effect, Craig and his supporters committed to partition Ulster itself.

Within two months, the UUC convened once more. In a series of impassioned statements, disillusioned delegates from Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan implored their 'fellow Unionists... not to desert us'. Veterans ruefully recalled signing the Ulster Covenant in 1912, when 500,000 unionists pledged 'all means which may be found necessary' to 'defeat' the Third Home Rule Bill. Just eight years later, shocked unionists in the three border counties accused their former leaders of casting Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan aside, in breach of their own Covenant. Pleading to maintain a nine-county Ulster, officials from the three counties demanded an extraordinary UUC meeting, but they were voted down. The exchanges descended into rancour, and the unionists of Ulster's three 'lost counties' were cut adrift.

A Free State forged in civil war

Following almost four years of intermittent guerrilla warfare, the Irish Free State was founded in December 1922 in a febrile political atmosphere. After more than 2,000 people lost their lives in the Anglo-Irish War, republicans and crown forces had agreed a truce on 9 July 1921. Signed by British and Irish delegates five months later, the subsequent Treaty allowed for a semi-independent Irish Free State within the British Empire. Free State parliamentarians would be compelled to swear allegiance to King George V, the head of state. Meanwhile, Northern Ireland's six-county parliament could opt out of the Free State and essentially maintain its union with Britain. By the summer of 1922, with republicans split over the Treaty, civil war erupted between the pro-Treaty National Army and the anti-Treaty 'Irregulars'. By a transitional arrangement, a Provisional Government administered Southern Ireland until December 1922, when a new government in Dublin formally adopted the Treaty's terms and established the Irish Free State.

As erstwhile republican comrades fought the Civil War, loyalists on the 'southern' side of the new border were often caught in the conflict, and sometimes deliberately attacked by recalcitrant republicans. Cross-border raids and territorial disputes were rife. Preparing for the coming fight, anti-Treaty 'Irregulars' in Lifford, County Donegal commandeered the Orange Hall, forcing the caretaker to flee, and burst into the homes of loyalists in nearby Stranorlar. In the nascent Free State, Protestant landowners held some 28 percent of larger farms of 200 acres or more: many became targets for the anti-Treatyites. In Newtowncunningham, 'Irregulars' kidnapped James Black, a leading loyalist, and ordered him at gunpoint to vacate his land within the hour.

Although raiders often claimed political authority, sometimes expropriations reflected sheer opportunism, inflected with sectarian motivation. In County Cavan, an eleven-strong armed gang raided the residence of wealthy Protestant Thomas Colby Burrows, stealing jewellery, furniture, and cash. Many Protestants around Ballyjamesduff were similarly plundered. Loyalists suffered significant material losses during the Civil War. From 1926, the British government's second Irish Grants Committee awarded 2,237 compensation awards to could demonstrate that between 1921 and 1923 they had suffered distress due to their 'allegiance to the government of the United Kingdom'.

Until the defeated Irregulars dumped their arms in May 1923, the Civil War underlined Free State unionists' political vulnerability. For example, in Pettigo, on the Donegal-Fermanagh border, Protestants comprised four-fifths of the village's population in 1922. That summer, anti-Treaty republicans plotting attacks on crown forces also kidnapped and expelled local loyalists. When Irregulars sacked the village, two Protestant families immediately fled to Canada. Others made the considerably shorter journey into Northern Ireland, while some crossed the Irish Sea for a new life in Britain. The Pettigo diaspora captured in microcosm a broader pattern of Protestant flight from the Free State: by 1926, the non-Catholic population had declined by more than 100,000 in just fifteen years.

Unionists 'betrayed'

As unwilling citizens of the Free State at its foundation in 1922, loyalists in Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan frequently charged the northern unionist elite with betrayal. Unionists in the lost counties neither forgave nor forgot Sir James Craig for convincing the UUC to prioritise the six counties – Antrim, Armagh, Derry/Londonderry, Down, Fermanagh, and Tyrone – which became Northern Ireland in 1921. For unionists south of the border, the triumphalism of Northern Ireland's founding grandees jarred. Touring County Fermanagh in October 1923 as Northern Ireland's first Prime Minister, Craig roused ebullient crowds by declaring that the border suited northern unionists, and they would maintain it.

Craig's bombast left Protestants in the lost counties both disappointed and disillusioned. The perceived duplicity of the Northern Ireland unionists remained seared in Protestant collective memory throughout Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan. In 1932, two decades after signing the Covenant, a Donegal loyalist remembered how the former Irish Unionist Party leader and Belfast MP Sir Edward Carson had 'betrayed shamelessly' his 'fellow Covenanters'.

Loyalists in the Free State also reserved ire for Westminster. In 1924, congratulating the Free State government for restoring peace after the revolutionary period's violent upheavals, the Orange Order hierarchy in Cavan and Monaghan favourably counterposed the Dublin government to their former allies in London and Belfast. Castigating the architects of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, senior officials in the Orange Order charged British plenipotentiaries and the UUC alike with deserting them. At a commemorative event in 1925, a spirited crowd cheered the Cavan Grand Master's scorn for Whitehall, which had 'thrown us overboard'. A listener's exclamation – 'Down with England!' – received popular acclaim.

Having first charged their northern brethren with betrayal, lost counties loyalists subsequently arraigned Northern Ireland's political and religious leaders for underestimating southern Protestants' initiative and ingenuity. Meeting in Belfast in July 1923, the Presbyterian Church General Assembly claimed that their number faced severe discrimination in the Free State. Over the border, however, a leading Presbyterian jurist refuted the General Assembly's assessment. Judge Brown of Cavan Quarter Sessions asserted that even amid political unrest, the county's Presbyterians had upheld their traditions and enjoyed largely harmonious relations with their Catholic neighbours. Furthermore, the same year, the hierarchy of the Church of Ireland insisted that Belfast unionists exaggerated the subjugation of Free State Protestants.

Determined to contribute to the governance of the nascent state, unionist farmers, businesspeople, and gentry alike carefully coordinated independent political campaigns. Mobilising explicitly as a minority in the twenty-six counties, Protestant candidates in the Free State election of 1923 implored their co-religionists to vote along community lines. Standing in Monaghan, for example, James A. Barnes hoped to attract cross-community support as a 'Peace Candidate', but primarily positioned himself as a 'Representative of the Protestant minority Farming interests'. Barnes envisioned 'distinct representatives' for 'Protestants in this County'. Determined to elect to the Dáil (the lower parliamentary house) a discernibly Protestant Teachta Dála (TD) among the constituency's three, the Orange Order in Monaghan invited 'Protestant Electors' to the town's lodge for instructions on how to register and where to vote.

The self-interested desire to establish coherent political representation undoubtedly motivated these loyalists' constructive orientation towards the fledgling state. But after the Civil War gave way to greater political stability under President W. T. Cosgrave's Cumann na nGaedheal government, there were instances of cross-community altruism in the Free State's rural border areas. Sometimes these encounters simply represented neighbourly sociability; on other occasions, they were explicitly ecumenical. In north-east Donegal in 1923, for example, when Presbyterian churches at Fahan and Inch faced significant financial difficulties, members of the local Catholic congregation assisted in organising fund-raising fetes.

Meanwhile, loyalists and the pro-Treaty Cumann na nGaedheal government shared a common interest in defending the new polity against republican insurrection. In 1927, when President Cosgrave introduced a strict Public Safety Act – compelling all election candidates to pledge allegiance to the state – a Protestant minister in County Cavan congratulated Cumann na nGaedheal for transforming the 'lawless' society of the early 1920s into a polity characterised by 'righteousness, truth, justice and charity'.

The unlikely but mutual affinity between southern unionists and erstwhile republican prisoner Kevin O'Higgins is especially illustrative. A former captain in the Irish Volunteers, Kevin O'Higgins had been imprisoned in 1918 for protesting against the British military. By 1922, however, having endorsed the Anglo-Irish Treaty – albeit with some misgivings – O'Higgins was the Free State's first Minister for Home Affairs. He swiftly gained a justified reputation for upholding 'law and order' against anti-Treaty republicans. Standing for election in 1923, Monaghan Orangeman Alexander Haslett pledged to support O'Higgins's crusade against 'anarchy and crime'. As the Free State's Justice Minister, O'Higgins sanctioned the execution of seventy-seven republicans, including many of his former comrades. When anti-Treatyites assassinated O'Higgins in July 1927, loyalists in the border

counties offered laudatory obituaries. The annual meeting of the Royal Black Preceptories in Cavan and Monaghan mourned the 'irreparable loss' of O'Higgins, whose 'moral courage' and 'outstanding intellectual power' had protected the fledgling state against 'evil doers'.

Until 1925, minorities on both sides of the new border hoped that the Boundary Commission – which emerged from Article 12 of the Anglo-Irish Treaty – would recommend that the border be redrawn. With Eoin MacNeill representing the Free State and J. R. Fisher for Northern Ireland, the Commission eventually convened in November 1924. Unionists in County Donegal lobbied especially energetically for frontier territories to be redesignated. Addressing an Orange meeting in Ballinamallard, County Fermanagh, in 1924, Captain W. H. Fyffe MBE urged east Donegal's Protestants to request 'land transfers' to Northern Ireland. Highlighting the scale of the Protestant population, the unionist election agent for Fermanagh-Tyrone, W. E. Orr, declared that Northern Ireland had legitimate claims to Donegal territory. In May 1925, the Donegal Protestant Registration Association duly petitioned the Boundary Commission to allocate at least the county's eastern flank to Northern Ireland.

'Our voices should weigh with the powers that be'

Leaked to the press in November 1925, the Boundary Commission's report disappointed hopes of the border being redrawn. Notwithstanding some initial despondency, however, the fastening of the frontier impelled prominent Free State unionists to maintain distinct Protestant representation in the Dáil. Pragmatically, loyalists vowed to pursue prosperity and intercommunal harmony through Dublin's political institutions. In Pettigo, racked by violence during the Civil War, a Protestant churchman told the media that his congregation viewed the Free State with 'growing satisfaction' and simply wished to coexist peaceably with their Catholic counterparts. Similarly, independent Donegal TD Major J. Sproule Myles told a church bazaar in Stranorlar that the district's Protestants were determined to constitute a constructive political 'force' in the Free State.

Ironically, southern Protestants' increasingly positive orientation towards the Free State contrasted sharply from the northern unionists' continual bravado. In 1924, during 12th July celebrations in north Belfast – commemorating the Protestant King William of Orange's victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 – the northern unionist grandee Sir Joseph Davison addressed the crowd. Inveighing belligerently against the Free State, Davison intimated that 'by right' Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan should be annexed to Northern Ireland. The crowd cheered further when a Glasgow loyalist bullishly pledged guns to realise Davison's ideals.

Many of the 150 Orange lodges in the lost counties implored their members to participate fully in public life and consolidate their status as aspirant, God-fearing citizens. In Newbliss, County Monaghan, Grand Master Michael E. Knight told an 8,000-strong meeting that it was incumbent upon Protestants to live on the 'best terms' with their neighbours and prove themselves 'worthy citizens' of the Free State. Community leaders adumbrated a mutually beneficial contract with Dublin. In Belturbet, County Cavan, W. H. Johnston swore that all Orangemen would support Cumann na nGaedheal 'so long as that government protected them'.

Participating in political institutions did not, however, mean that Protestant civic leaders had simply acquiesced and assimilated in the Free State's Gaelicised cultural directions. Loyalists who generally admired Dublin democracy resisted what they considered nationalist dogma. Especially in the late 1920s, the Irish language was a major point of contention among Protestant clerics. Addressing a prize-giving ceremony at Clones High School, the Bishop of Clogher averred that if the school made Irish language classes compulsory, Protestant parents should withdraw their children and send them to schools over the border instead.

Asserting their communal independence in a predominantly Catholic polity, the more affluent Protestants were especially wont to remind the Dublin exchequer of their fiscal significance. Presiding at a lodge meeting in 1927, County Cavan District Master Vogan implored Orangemen to

remember 'we have very big interests in the Free State, and we are large taxpayers, and we think for those reasons our voices should weigh with the powers that be'.

For loyalists who engaged enthusiastically with the Free State's civic apparatus, the British Empire remained a cornerstone of their identities. Commemorating the Twelfth in 1929, Michael E. Knight – a solicitor and Grand Master of the Monaghan Orange Order – reiterated that the oath of allegiance to the crown formed a 'last vestige of respect to the head of the great British Empire of which this country forms a part'. Entreating the Dublin government to regard the Protestant minority 'in the friendliest spirit', Knight recalled how his fellow Protestants had formed an 'influential section' of Free State society, and 'proved themselves' as 'friends' of judicious government.

'Part and parcel' of the Empire

By the end of the 1920s, the unionists of the three 'lost counties' of Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan could reflect upon almost a decade in the Irish Free State. As a dwindling minority in the twenty-six counties, theirs was a position of perennial precarity. Moreover, loyalists who found consolation in the Free State's Dominion status remained wary of the more bellicose exponents of Irish republicanism. Especially after 1932, when Fianna Fáil formed its first government, unionists found greater cause to fear that the Free State's connection with Britain would be further diluted. The new president, Éamon de Valera, had promised to review the Anglo-Irish Treaty and abolish Dáil deputies' oath of allegiance to the crown. By 1933, de Valera had amended the constitution, removing Free State legal claimants' right of appeal to the Privy Council.

Nevertheless, loyalists in the lost counties continually drew strength from their enduring cultural practices and imperial affinities. Pragmatically, unionist politicians and religious leaders had participated cohesively in the Free State's civic institutions. Perhaps paradoxically, experiences of unnerving isolation at the turn of the 1920s imbued southern loyalists with a robust sense of independence and resilience. Moreover, in their convenient common cause with the pro-Treaty Free State governments of the 1920s, they fashioned hybrid and durable political identities. Celebrating 'the twelfth' in Bailieborough, County Cavan in 1927, a reverend brother could simultaneously position his community among the Irish Free State's 'loyal citizens', while proclaiming 'unswerving loyalty and devotion' to George V and 'rejoic[ing] that we are part and parcel of the greatest Empire in the world, on whose flag the sun never sets'.