

**CATHOLICS IN NORTHERN
IRELAND:
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
AND CROSS-BORDER
RELATIONS,
1920-1932**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AOH	Ancient Order of Hibernians
BMH	Bureau of Military History
COFLA	Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library and Archive
DIB	Dictionary of Irish Biography
IRA	Irish Republican Army
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
NEBB	North Eastern Boundary Bureau
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
TNA	The National Archives of the UK
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UULA	Ulster Unionist Labour Association

INTRODUCTION

Most historians and contemporary observers agree that the post-partition Catholic population in Northern Ireland was affected by increasing political apathy. According to Enda Staunton, the January municipal elections and the rural and county elections held in June 1920 were characterised by widespread apathy among northern Catholics. Staunton claims that this attitude was due to the uncertain political situation of the time, when partition was not yet accomplished, whereas after the approval of the Government of Ireland Act in December 1920, northern Catholics' political participation increased.¹ However, Mary Harris states that apathy continued to affect the Catholic community: shortly before the 1921 elections for the northern parliament, the Bishop of Down and Connor wrote a letter urging Catholics to vote because he feared that lack of interest would affect turnout and undermine nationalist representation.² Throughout the following years, widespread apathy among northern Catholics was reported by contemporary observers. In 1923, Hugh MacCartan, who visited the six counties as agent of the North Eastern Boundary Bureau, found that the minority was disorganised and lacked interest in politics.³

According to unionists, Catholics, who openly resented their inclusion in Northern Ireland, were inherently disloyal and ready to sabotage the state. However, Marianne Elliott points out that "most Catholics did not actively work against the Northern Ireland state, even though they disliked its political leaders".⁴ Nevertheless, they did grow detached from politics and "virtually opted out of the state, retreating almost into a ghetto".⁵ As Brian Barton and Eamon Phoenix argue, by the late 1920s, the disappointment following a decade of political failures had made northern Catholics not only apathetic, but also cynical.⁶

This interpretation of Catholics' political behaviour is based on a narrow definition of political participation according to which historians and political scientists have long focused

¹ E. Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland, 1918-1973* (Dublin, 2001), p. 39.

² M. Harris, 'The Catholic Church, minority rights, and the founding of the Northern Irish state', in D. Keogh and M. H. Haltzel (eds.), *Northern Ireland and the Politics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 67.

³ A. C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), p. 253.

⁴ M. Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster* (London, 2000), p. 384.

⁵ P. Buckland, *A History of Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1981), p. 60.

⁶ B. Barton, 'Northern Ireland, 1925-1939', in J. R. Hill (ed.), *A New History of Ireland Volume VII: Ireland 1921-84* (Oxford, 2011), p. 219; E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 397.

on elections, parties and lobbying.⁷ In the last decades, the rise of public protests, transnational advocacy groups and e-petitioning, paralleled by the crisis of traditional representative democracy across the Western world have encouraged the study of alternative forms of popular representation and participation. Reflecting on contemporary trends of decreasing levels of party membership and voting, political scientists have argued that there is no crisis in political participation, but rather in engagement.⁸ Moreover, the failure to participate in traditional forms of political expression, such as voting, does not necessarily imply apathy and lack of interest.⁹

In history, the widespread feeling that the impact of high politics on the life of ordinary citizens is decreasing has given new impetus to the so called 'new political history', which started to emerge in the early 1980s.¹⁰ The new political history has attempted to shift the subject of investigation from leadership, diplomacy and institutions to the experience of politics, although the general trend in British and Irish historiography remains the history of political parties.¹¹ Nevertheless, many historians have started investigating the evolution of participation, representation and democratic development in a variety of national and transnational contexts, from anti-slavery movements to petitioning.¹² This trend has had a limited impact on the study of 1920s politics in Ireland so far, despite the existence of significant examples of alternative forms of political participation.

Since its birth, the government of Northern Ireland did little to gain the respect of the Catholic minority, while nationalist representatives were incapable of redressing their supporters' grievances. Therefore, duty norms on which modern states rely declined, and few Catholics felt that it was their duty to actively engage in politics. The result was the

⁷ R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000); G. Stoker, *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁸ B. McCaffrie and S. Akram, 'Recognizing the Democratic Potential of Alternative Forms of Political Participation', *Democratic Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter 2014), p. 47.

⁹ C. Hay, *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge, 2007), ch. 2.

¹⁰ R. Samuel and G. Stedman Jones, 'The Labour Party and Social Democracy', in R. Samuel and G. S. Jones (eds.), *Culture, Ideology and Politics* (London, 1982).

¹¹ P. Readman, 'The State of Twentieth-Century British Political History', *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 21 No. 3 (July 2009).

¹² M. Janse, 'Holland as a Little England'? British Anti-Slavery Missionaries and Continental Abolitionist Movements in the Mid Nineteenth Century', *Past and Present*, Vol. 229 No. 1 (2015), pp. 123-160; B. Agnès, 'Le « Pétitionnaire universel » : les normes de la pétition en France et au Royaume-Uni pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, Vol. 4 No. 58-4 (2011), pp. 45-70; H. Miller, 'Popular petitioning and the corn laws, 1833-1846', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 127 No. (2012), pp. 882-919.

apathy pointed out by historians. However, what most studies fail to acknowledge is that another consequence of the political isolation of the minority was that Catholics found new ways to engage in politics and express their aspirations. It is the purpose of this thesis to explore alternative forms of political participation in Northern Ireland in the years between partition (1920) and the withdrawal of nationalist representatives from the Belfast parliament (1932).

This thesis does not mean to argue that political allegiance in 1920s Northern Ireland was necessarily a function of religious identity, as the case of the Labour Party winning votes from both communities proves.¹³ However, it is generally assumed that the Catholic minority supported Sinn Féin or the Nationalist Party in opposition to unionism. The focus on alternative forms of political participation does not imply that these and traditional politics were mutually exclusive. Turnout at parliamentary elections remained above 65% throughout the 1920s and although there is no data referring specifically to the minority, no evidence suggests that Catholic voters boycotted elections when nationalist representatives chose to run.¹⁴ It is reasonable to assume that Catholics considered voting as a means to express their political allegiance, rather than change state policies.¹⁵ In a context where a significant section of citizens felt alienated from the state where they lived, and abandoned by the state they wished to join, political participation which was not primarily state-focused became central to their experience of politics.

The time span under consideration, and the fact that the governments of Northern Ireland and of the Free State were responsible, to a high degree, for the political alienation of the Catholic minority, require that the issues of partition and nationalist attitudes towards Irish unity are also addressed in this thesis. Traditionally, nationalists rejected partition on the ground that the Irish people constituted one nation and Ulster unionists' opposition to unity was engineered and fostered by the English.¹⁶ In the first decades of the twentieth century, nationalist authors tried to provide this argument with a historical basis.

¹³ A. Edwards, *A history of the Northern Ireland Labour Party* (Manchester, 2009), p. 2.

¹⁴ S. Elliott, *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Elections Results, 1921-1972* (Chichester, 1973), p. 105.

¹⁵ R. Rose, *Governing without Consensus* (London, 1971), p. 234.

¹⁶ J. McGarry and B. O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 25-35; J. H. Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1990), ch. 6.

Alice Stopford Green claimed that the native Gaels had always assimilated foreign elements coming to settle in Ireland. For example, between the ninth and eleventh century, the Scandinavians settled along the coast, intermarried with the natives, welcomed local poets into their forts and even joined the Irish in some wars. From the twelfth century, landless Normans from England started to invade Ireland. They rejected the language, customs and laws of the native population, and tried to make their territories “a little England”.¹⁷ With time, some of the colonists adopted the Irish language and customs, but the English feared their assimilation into the Irish nation because it would weaken their power on the island. In order to prevent assimilation, England continued to send new colonists to Ireland, and fostered divisions within the people living there: “Civil wars within any country exhaust themselves and come to a natural end. But civil wars maintained by a foreign power from without have no conclusion”.¹⁸

James Winder Good paid more attention to class dynamics in Ireland than to British interference with Irish affairs. Good argued that the Ascendancy maintained a close relation with Britain in order to protect their privileged position, not for loyalty towards the Crown. With the passing of the Act of Union, the Anglo-Irish Protestant landowning élite “abandoned any claim that it had formerly possessed to speak for Ireland, and fought openly and without shame for the privileges of a class as against the right of a people”.¹⁹

Different nationalist authors pointed out that Ulster unionists never demanded to be separated from the rest of the country, and that partition was a makeshift solution devised by the English.²⁰ This interpretation has remained almost unchallenged for decades, until a series of works published in the 1950s downplayed British influence on Ulster Protestants, arguing that London did not impose partition but implemented it in response to northern unionists’ opposition to unification.²¹ However, during the period under consideration in the present work, the traditional nationalist interpretation of partition and unionism was widespread.

¹⁷ A. Stopford Green, *Irish Nationality* (London, 2011), p. 101.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁹ J. W. Good, *Irish Unionism* (Dublin, 1920), pp. 77-8.

²⁰ North-Eastern Boundary Bureau (issued by), *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (Dublin, 1923), ch. 3; D. Gwynn, *History of Partition, 1912-1925* (Dublin, 1950), pp. 23-7; F. Gallagher, *The Indivisible Island* (London, 1957), pp. 300-6.

²¹ M. Sheehy, *Divided we stand: a study of partition* (London, 1955), ch. 2.

In more recent years, partition has received little attention in studies on nationalism, which have tended to assume that independent post-colonial polities maintained the territorial boundaries of previous colonial states.²² In Ireland, in particular, historians have long adopted a “partitionist perspective”, thus focusing on the history of North and South separately.²³ Nevertheless, the southern governments’ attitude towards the Ulster question has been the object of a few important studies.

John Bowman was the first to provide an exhaustive examination of de Valera’s Ulster policy from 1917 to 1973, a task that he describes as extremely difficult due to the inaccessibility of sources and the complexity of the Fianna Fáil founder’s thought. Bowman argues that de Valera’s anti-partition stance was part of his strategy to exploit nationalism to gain and maintain power, although his commitment to Irish unity was sincere. However, his refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of unionist claims and to recognise the northern government prevented him from devising an effective and consistent Ulster policy.²⁴ The ideological importance of partition is recognised by Clare O’Halloran, who analyses how southern politicians responded to it. O’Halloran describes southern images and stereotypes of the North, highlighting the common perception of northern Catholics as a burden which most politicians in the South wished to get rid of. Finally, the most recent account is that of Stephen Kelly, who focuses on Fianna Fáil’s northern strategy from 1926 to 1971, claiming that the party’s refusal to recognise Northern Ireland, and its insistence on British responsibility to work for reunification, which could only be achieved through a federal solution, undermined any possibility to end partition.²⁵

Only in the last decades, thanks to the influence of sociology, anthropology and geography, have historians started to move beyond the traditional northern and southern perspectives, and to analyse cross-border relations at local level.²⁶ Border studies in Ireland have helped

²² B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1983); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge, 1990).

²³ P. Bew, ‘Against Partitionist History’, in *Ideology and the Irish question: Ulster unionism and Irish nationalism, 1912-1916* (Oxford, 1998), pp. ix–xix.

²⁴ J. Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster Question, 1917-1973* (Oxford, 1982).

²⁵ S. Kelly, *Fianna Fáil, Partition and Northern Ireland, 1926-1971* (Irish Academic Press, 2013).

²⁶ N. Zivan, *Working the border – Contact and cooperation in the border region, 1949 – 1972* (University of Oxford, DPhil thesis, 2007); P. Leary, *Unapproved Routes. Histories of the Irish Border, 1922-1972* (Oxford, 2016).

shifting attention from high politics to the experience of common people, but their focus has been primarily on everyday life, rather than on political engagement.

The most detailed accounts of the events under consideration in this thesis are provided by Eamon Phoenix and Enda Staunton. Both authors focus their attention on the nationalist community in an attempt to fill a significant gap in Irish historiography, which has paid little attention to northern Catholics after 1920.²⁷ Phoenix's excellent work highlights the different shades of Catholic opinion in the North, going beyond the nationalists vs republicans dialectic and acknowledging the importance of the geographical divide between east and west. Staunton prefers to focus on the uneasy relation between nationalists, republicans and Labour, stressing the social conservatism of Catholic representatives and the strong influence of the Church on their policy. Unlike Phoenix, his book does not offer any micro analysis of local politics which would likely help to understand some unclear passages.

Marianne Elliott's work is not a political examination of northern nationalism, but a narration of how a distinct Ulster Catholic identity, largely based on grievance and victimhood, came to be from the pre-Christian era until the late 1990s. Although the section on the period between 1920 and 1932 is far less detailed than in Phoenix and Staunton, Elliott's valuable contribution lies in her analysis of how certain events shaped Catholics' self-perception and inter-communal relations in the short and long term.²⁸ Similarly, Oliver Rafferty offers an overview of the history of Ulster Catholics from 1603 to 1983, which focuses on the internal cohesion of the community generated by the pressure of foreign political, economic and cultural systems imposed by the seventeenth-century Plantation. Rafferty acknowledges that Catholics' strong sense of community and distrust of Protestants contributed to their alienation from the state and tends to focus on inter-community relations, overlooking antagonism between different nationalist factions.²⁹

Another fundamental contribution to the study of northern nationalism comes from A. C. Hepburn's work on the Catholic community in Belfast. Hepburn seeks to undermine the

²⁷ F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1963); R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London, 1988); J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985* (Cambridge, 1989); D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004).

²⁸ M. Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster* (London, 2000).

²⁹ O. P. Rafferty, *Catholicism in Ulster, 1603-1983* (Dublin, 1994).

republican premise attributing responsibility for the sectarianisation of northern politics not only to unionists but also to constitutional nationalists, who bound the party with the Catholic Church instead of promoting policies going beyond the religious divide. Like Phoenix and Staunton, Hepburn devotes much attention to Joe Devlin, leader of constitutional nationalism from the pre-partition era to his death in 1934. Devlin's paramount importance for the study of Northern Ireland cannot be overstated, and the lack of scholarly work on him, partially due to the loss of his papers, constitutes a serious gap in the historiography of nationalism in Ireland.

However, by focusing on Devlin and his relationships with other politicians and Churchmen, Phoenix, Staunton and Hepburn continue to adopt the traditional top-down perspective of high politics. In their attempt at evaluating the impact of major events on the life of northern Catholics, the latter are often assumed to be passive victims of processes they are not in control of. This thesis seeks to analyse how northern Catholics responded to events such as partition and the Boundary Commission from a bottom-up perspective. In particular, by examining how Catholics responded to calls for political participation on different occasions, it is hoped to identify what motivated mobilisation and what interests people tried to defend through their engagement in politics.

In this thesis, the analysis of alternative forms of political participation develops on a case-study rather than strictly chronological basis. The three main case-studies consist in under researched events and organisations at different stages of the period under scrutiny. Local sources tend to supplement the narrative of national events to emphasise how the geographical context, local politics and personal hostilities influenced the political experience of northern Catholics.

The first of the three case-studies is the Belfast boycott. After Catholic workers were expelled from Belfast shipyards and firms in summer 1920, the republican leadership organised a boycott of northern goods to force their reinstatement and prove Ulster's economic dependence upon the rest of Ireland. Although historians agree that the Belfast boycott significantly contributed to increase divisions between North and South and between northern Catholics and Protestants, the subject is generally overlooked in secondary literature. The second chapter of this thesis describes how the boycott became an important opportunity to express opposition to partition and solidarity towards northern

Catholics, as well as hostility to Protestants in general. A variety of sources is here analysed, with particular attention to the few surviving boycott lists and claims for compensation from people whose business activities were damaged by the campaign. Together with statements from the Bureau of Military History and numerous reports from local newspapers, these documents help to clarify how the boycott was implemented and who was involved, significantly contributing to the understanding of grass-root politics between 1920 and 1922.

The second case study is the Boundary Commission, envisaged by the Anglo-Irish Treaty to redraw the border according to the wishes of local inhabitants. Although several historians have considered this topic, they have tended to focus on the negotiations between the governments of London, Belfast and Dublin, and on the work of the commissioners, paying little attention to common citizens involved in the preparations for the Commission. The third chapter aims at filling this gap by analysing statements of evidence arguing for the transfer of border areas to the Free State. These statements were compiled by citizens living in border areas under the supervision of agents of the North Eastern Boundary Bureau, established by the Free State government with the task of preparing documents arguing the nationalist case to present to the Commission. They provide new insight into the different factors that shaped Catholics' responses to partition and their political allegiance.

The last case study centres on the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) over the period between 1920 and 1932. The AOH was an exclusively Catholic society attached to the Nationalist Party of Northern Ireland that organised cultural and sporting activities, and provided facilities and opportunities for political discussion. Since Hibernian membership sharply decreased in parallel with the decline of constitutional nationalism after 1916, historians have failed to acknowledge its importance in post-partition Ireland. However, analysis of the local press, of the *Hibernian Journal* and reports by police officers watching Hibernian activities show that the organisation played a significant role in the life of northern Catholics between 1920 and 1932. Nationalist leaders used Hibernian structures and facilities to fight the growing depoliticization of northern Catholics, mobilising the population in support of constitutional nationalism.

CHAPTER ONE

DISCRIMINATION AND POLITICAL ALIENATION OF THE CATHOLIC MINORITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 1920-1932

- **Introduction**

After the stunning victory of Sinn Féin at the general election of December 1918, republican MPs refused to take their seats in Westminster and established their own parliament in Dublin, Dáil Éireann. As the IRA engaged in a war against the British, in December 1920 the Government of Ireland Act partitioned Ireland into a northern and a southern state with limited self-governing powers. Unsatisfied with the degree of independence granted, the IRA continued the war in the attempt to establish a republic, while in May 1921, elections for the Dublin and Belfast parliaments were held simultaneously. In the South, the elected 124 republican MPs boycotted the parliament established by the Government of Ireland Act and formed a second Dáil.¹ In Northern Ireland, the elections returned forty Unionists, six nationalists (Irish Parliamentary Party) and six republicans (Sinn Féin).²

Elections results represented a fairly accurate projection of the composition of the population in Northern Ireland, where 820,000 Protestants generally supported unionism, whereas 430,000 Catholics were divided between republicans and nationalists.³ The twelve Catholic MPs refused to take their seats, and a number of local bodies under their control swore allegiance to Dáil Éireann instead of the northern government: as a result, they were dissolved and replaced by officials sent from Belfast.⁴ The boycott of the northern government was due to the fact that the vast majority of Catholics in Northern Ireland wished to join the South rather than live in a predominantly Protestant state. However, if republicans were confident that the Dáil would not abandon them, nationalists, as fierce opponents of Sinn Féin, were reluctant to rely on southern support. Among their ranks,

¹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 133.

² D. Harkness, *Northern Ireland since 1920* (Dublin, 1983), p. 9.

³ M. Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State* (London, 1976), p. 24.

⁴ P. Buckland, *History of Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1981), pp. 33-5; E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast 1994), pp. 152, 167-8. See for example the case of Magherafelt Rural Council, ch. four, p. 210.

there were some who believed it wiser to come to terms with the reality of partition and try to co-operate with unionists in order to defend nationalist interests.

The establishment of the Free State in the South as a self-governing dominion seemed to weaken chances to end partition, though republican leaders argued that the Boundary Commission, envisaged by article 12 of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, would bring justice to northern Catholics. The Commission's task was to redraw the boundaries between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants. Since Catholics constituted the majority of the population in several northern districts along the border, they expected those portions of territory to be transferred to the Irish Free State. However, when the Commission's report was made public at the end of 1925, the governments of the Free State and Northern Ireland considered it unsatisfactory and refused to implement it, thus leaving the border as it was. Since the Commission was implemented only in 1924, in the previous years northern Catholics looked for a strategy to deal with unionists. Both nationalists and republicans sought the advice of the Free State government, where Michael Collins, the young Minister for Finance, became their main interlocutor.⁵ Collins did his best to provide northern Catholics with political and financial support, but after his death in August 1922, the Free State gradually stopped intervening in Ulster affairs, leaving the minority to deal with Unionists alone.

In 1922, the northern government proceeded to reorganise rural electoral districts, having abolished Proportional Representation for local elections, which was established by the Government of Ireland Act as a guarantee for the minority. The majority of nationalist and republican representatives refused to co-operate with the commission in charge of redrawing the boundaries, and protested against what they saw as a gerrymandering project aimed at depriving Catholics of fair representation.⁶ In the end, the reform of electoral boundaries led to local government being overwhelmingly in the hands of unionists, even in areas with Catholic majorities. This was acknowledged, around fifty years later, by the Cameron Commission, conducting an inquiry into disturbances in Northern Ireland.⁷ John Whyte agrees that gerrymandering in local elections significantly

⁵ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 167.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 274-5.

⁷ D. Harkness, *Northern Ireland since 1920* (Dublin, 1983), p. 29.

discriminated against Catholics. Although republicans and nationalists repeatedly boycotted elections in the 1920s, the fact that unionists held 62 local authorities out of 73 after the 1923 reform appears to be the result of intentional manipulation.⁸

Another controversial piece of legislation was the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act, approved in April 1922. Although intended as a temporary measure responding to sectarian violence, it was periodically renewed until 1972. It transferred military powers, such as that of imposing curfew, prohibiting public meetings and regulating the possession of firearms, to the executive.⁹ It became one of the main sources of grievance of the Catholic population since it gave ample discretionary power to the Minister, and one of its immediate effects was the internment without trial of hundreds of suspected IRA members in May 1922.¹⁰ The Act also granted the power to expel people from all or parts of Northern Ireland.¹¹

As the failure of the Boundary Commission to right the wrongs of partition became apparent, nationalist MPs grew eager to take their seats in the Belfast parliament and try to counteract unionist power. Gerrymandering and the Special Powers Act were not the only sources of grievance, as Catholics felt victims of employment discrimination. In the civil service, for example, discrimination was widespread, despite the opposition of a few high government officials such as the Minister of Finance Pollock and the head of civil service Col. Spender.¹² The Belfast Corporation was accused of excluding Catholics from employment in positions under its control, since they were only 48 out of 855 salaried officials.¹³ In recent years, although it has been recognised that Catholics were under-represented in higher grades of public employment, several possible causes have been discussed, from their lower education attainment to their refusal to work for a state they rejected. Moreover, it is possible that unionists favoured their “own milieu” when appointing civil servants, without intentionally trying to discriminate against Catholics.¹⁴

⁸ J. H. Whyte, ‘How much discrimination was there under the unionist regime, 1921-68?’, in *Contemporary Irish Studies* (Manchester, 1983), p. 6.

⁹ L. K. Donohue, ‘Regulating Northern Ireland: The Special Powers Acts, 1922-1972’, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Dec. 1998), p. 1090.

¹⁰ D. Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf* (Belfast, 1988), p. 103.

¹¹ D. Harkness, *Northern Ireland since 1920* (Dublin, 1983), p. 30; see the case of James Gillespie, pp. 14-5.

¹² P. Bew, P. Gibbon and H. Patterson, *The State in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 1979), p. 77.

¹³ *The Hibernian Journal*, October 1929.

¹⁴ J. H. Whyte, ‘How much discrimination was there under the unionist regime, 1921-68?’, in *Contemporary Irish Studies* (Manchester, 1983), p. 12.

However, unionist leaders often encouraged Protestants to recruit employers from their own community. In 1925, the Minister of Agriculture Edward Archdale proudly asserted that only four of the 109 employees in his Ministry were Catholics, and took care to stress that three of them were civil servants he had been forced to keep when he accepted the job.¹⁵ Public speeches of this kind likely contributed to the minority's self-perception as victim of unfair treatment at the hands of Protestants.

Before the 1925 elections, nationalist candidates announced that they intended to take their seats if elected, whereas republicans continued their abstention policy. In the end, ten nationalists and only two abstentionist republicans were returned, showing that the majority of northern Catholics did not believe in the boycott of the Belfast parliament.¹⁶ However, the presence of nationalist representatives in parliament could not prevent the abolition of Proportional Representation for parliamentary elections in early 1929. This was another safeguard of the minority rights envisaged by the Government of Ireland Act, and nationalists protested vehemently against its withdrawal. In the end, however, the abolition of PR mainly damaged small parties, such as Labour, that competed against unionists for Protestant votes.¹⁷ In fact, it did not harm Catholic representation since they elected twelve MPs before 1929, and eleven after.¹⁸ However, the inability of the Nationalist Party to oppose the unionist majority effectively, and the lack of support from the Free State, finally persuaded nationalist representatives to withdraw from the Belfast parliament in May 1932.

This chapter serves as a background for the specific case studies analysed in the rest of the thesis. Here, I shall describe how Catholics in Northern Ireland developed their self-perception as a discriminated-against minority while their representatives failed to redress their grievances. Since high politics seemed ineffective, many Catholics turned to the non-traditional forms of political participation described in the next three chapters.

As the first part of this Introduction relates, there were several sources of grievance for northern Catholics. Here, I concentrate on the relationship of the minority with police and

¹⁵ M. Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State* (London, 1976), p. 90.

¹⁶ P. Buckland, *History of Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1981), p. 57.

¹⁷ D. Birrell and A. Murie, *Policy and Government in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1980), p. 94; P. Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances* (Dublin, 1979), pp. 225-7; J. H. Whyte, 'How much discrimination was there under the unionist regime, 1921-68?', in *Contemporary Irish Studies* (Manchester, 1983), pp. 3-4.

¹⁸ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 364.

military forces, and on the implementation of education reforms. These two topics allow us to analyse different attitudes of the unionist government towards the Catholic community: whereas the creation of a Protestant militia often accused of abuses against the minority was tolerated, Ministers of Education sincerely sought the contribution of the Roman Catholic Church to the reform process. Although the government made a few efforts to persuade Catholics to join the police forces, these were easily sabotaged by local commanders who rejected applications from non-Protestants. In contrast, while the character of public education in Northern Ireland became progressively more Protestant, this was due to the indulgence of Protestant churches rather than a clear determination to undermine Catholic schools.

However, it is important to remember that the unionist government was guided by an agenda prioritising the gaining of Protestants' loyalty over the fair treatment of the minority. Therefore, when sections of the Protestant population organised themselves and mobilised, they found that the government was ready to listen to them and, to various degrees, to satisfy their requests, whereas Catholic representatives were not met with much sympathy when they complained about discrimination. But responsibility for the increasing political alienation of the minority did not rest exclusively on the unionist government. The Catholic community was divided not only between nationalists and republicans, but also by conflicting interests and priorities, which contributed to distance many of them from the political process.

Armed forces in Northern Ireland

- **Historiography and the origins of unionist militancy**

The history of the armed forces in Northern Ireland is highly controversial. Their impartiality has often been questioned, particularly in relation to the Anglo-Irish War and the recent Troubles. The early years of the RUC and Special Constabulary are fundamental to an understanding of how the sectarian antagonism characterising Ulster society before

partition became endemic. In particular, the creation of almost exclusively Protestant police forces, whose abuses remained unpunished in most cases, contributed to strengthening mistrust and suspicion between the two communities.

Most accounts have been completed by non-professional historians. Michael Farrell, author of *Arming the Protestants*, is a civil rights activist; Sir Arthur Hezlet, who wrote an apologetic history of the B Specials, was a Royal Navy submariner; *The RUC, a Force under Fire*, is the work of a journalist, Chris Ryder. Each account is influenced by its author's personal experience and motivations, although to different degrees. Farrell's book is based on extensive archival research, and provides one of the best works on the subject. It is significant, however, that Farrell started his book by recalling "the fear and intense dislike the Specials aroused in the Catholic community in which I grew up".¹⁹ Contrary points of view characterise the other works mentioned here. Ryder states in his preface that his motivation for writing the book was "a limitless admiration for the valiant men and women of the modern RUC".²⁰ Hezlet was asked to write a history of the Special Constabulary by ex-District Commandants, and described his approach to the task as that of "an advocate whose purpose is to put his clients' case".²¹ Richard Doherty, a military historian, regretted that the RUC "received more opprobrium than credit in spite of the fact that the force held the line that allowed most of us who lived in Northern Ireland over the past three decades to live a life that was as normal as possible".²² Although it would be an exaggeration to describe these last three books as unionist propaganda, the need to redress the negative reputation of the armed forces in Northern Ireland clearly emerges from these accounts.

In terms of first-hand accounts, as Joost Augusteijn notes in the Introduction of the memoirs of John Regan, a Belfast Catholic police officer, little literature is available about the personal experiences of police officers.²³ The accounts discussed in this chapter were completed by Catholic ex-officers, who started their career in the Royal Irish Constabulary,

¹⁹ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), p. v.

²⁰ C. Ryder, *The RUC, a Force Under Fire* (London, 1989), p. xi.

²¹ A. Hezlet, *The "B" Specials* (London, 1972), Foreword.

²² R. Doherty, *The Thin Green Line* (Barnsley, 2004), pp. 1-2.

²³ J. Augusteijn (ed.), *The memoirs of John M. Regan: a Catholic officer in the RIC and RUC, 1909-1948* (Four Courts Press, 2007), p. 7.

and later transferred to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Their memories and perceptions are, as will be noted, very different. We lack similar accounts by Protestant officers.

Most historians, such as Ian Colvin, Ronald McNeill and A. T. Q. Stewart, date the start of unionist militancy to the third Home Rule crisis, whereas Timothy Bowman traces its origins to the Irish Volunteers and the Yeomanry of the eighteenth century.²⁴ By the time of the first Home Rule crisis, groups of men were reported drilling in the northern countryside, whereas in 1893, the Young Ulster movement was created as a secret society whose members owned rifles and exercised shooting regularly. As a result of these initiatives, it is likely that, by the time of the third Home Rule, a significant quantity of arms had already been imported into Ulster.²⁵ The Orange Order became involved in the purchase of arms, and encouraged its members to volunteer for military training.

Not only Orange Lodges but also local unionist clubs organised drilling and recruitment. Unionist clubs were formed in 1893, but not many were still active in 1910, when the third Home Rule Bill was resumed. The Ulster Unionist party started a massive campaign against Irish self-government, under the leadership of Edward Carson and James Craig. After organising thousands of meetings all across the United Kingdom and distributing millions of booklets, in September 1912, almost half a million men and women in Belfast signed a pledge of resistance, the Solemn League and Covenant or the corresponding women's Declaration. Unionist clubs were revived, and they took charge of most of the organisation work that led to the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in 1913, whose purpose was to resist any attempt to bring Ulster under the jurisdiction of the future Dublin parliament. In a year's time, the UVF counted 100,000 members who were being provided with arms.²⁶ In April 1914, the Volunteers smuggled 35,000 rifles and 5 million rounds of ammunition from Germany at Larne harbour in Antrim.²⁷ Without any interference from British authorities, which tolerated them, the Volunteers openly carried arms, marched and drilled.

²⁴ I. Colvin, *The Life of Lord Carson* (London, 1934), p. 82; R. McNeill, *Ulster's Stand for the Union* (London, 1922), pp. 56-9; A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Ulster Crisis* (London, 1967), p. 69; T. Bowman, *Carson's Army. The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-1922* (Manchester, 2007), ch. 1.

²⁵ T. Bowman, *Carson's Army. The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-1922* (Manchester, 2007), pp. 17-8.

²⁶ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), p. 4.

²⁷ P. Buckland, *Irish Unionism and the Origins of Northern Ireland, 1886-1922* (Dublin, 1973), p. 61.

At the outbreak of the First World War, unionist leaders sought to have the UVF incorporated in the British army as a distinct unit. Initially, the War Office declined the offer in the attempt to avoid entanglement in Irish politics. However, as it became evident that Irishmen were not keen to enlist, the British agreed to form an Ulster Division (the 36th division) with its own badge and commanded by unionist officers.²⁸ According to Bowman, the concessions granted to the 36th division were similar to those granted to other groups and organisations in Britain, such as the 38th Welsh Division. Political parties, businessmen and landowners often acted as recruiters and patronised army divisions.²⁹ However, in nationalists' eyes, British concessions to the UVF seemed unfair. Despite nationalists' demands, the British did not allow the formation of an Irish division, but only of Irish brigades whose officers were not Catholic.³⁰ As a result of the enlistment of UVF men into the British army, the organisation at home was left in the hands of old and often incompetent members. Although unionist leaders, conscious that the Home Rule question was not settled, continued training those Volunteers left in Ulster, the force almost completely disappeared during the war.

By the start of the Anglo-Irish war, northern unionists had already experienced military mobilisation in defence of the Union, and the British had proved themselves willing to tolerate such initiatives. The 36th division suffered severe losses, but the surviving Volunteers returned home having gained military experience, and many of them joined the army or the police and vigilante forces.³¹ In June 1920, the Lord Mayor of Belfast recruited twenty ex-soldiers and Volunteers to patrol the City Hall, fearing an IRA attack.³² These kinds of militias were generally employed in patrolling their own towns and villages at night. The UVF initially survived as a loose network, but in June 1920, unionist leaders officially called for a reorganisation of the Volunteers, and Lieutenant Colonel Wilfrid Spender was chosen as officer commanding. However, recruitment for the UVF proved unsuccessful, especially in mixed areas and where Protestants were in a minority.³³ Limited funding meant that

²⁸ T. Bowman, *Carson's Army. The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-1922* (Manchester, 2007), p. 163.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³⁰ S. Gwynn, *John Redmond's Last Years* (London, 1919), p. 174.

³¹ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), p. 6.

³² T. Bowman, *Carson's Army. The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-1922* (Manchester, 2007), p. 191.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3.

Volunteers could not be provided with arms nor paid, and little training was organised.

- **The birth of the Special Constabulary and Royal Ulster Constabulary**

As partition became increasingly likely, Craig started to demand the formation of a local force, arguing that Imperial troops in Northern Ireland would be withdrawn in case of emergency in Great Britain, thus leaving the Six Counties in danger of invasion from the South.³⁴ Moreover, there were often complaints that the Royal Irish Constabulary, the force discharging police duties, was unreliable and inefficient, since officers seldom left their barracks, and no intelligence system was in place.³⁵ This was due to the fact that British authorities transferred the most reliable and loyal RIC officers to the South and West of Ireland, where the situation was more critical, while older and less efficient officers were sent north. Another problem with the RIC was that most unionists distrusted it, not only because the force was overwhelmingly Catholic, but also because Sinn Féin had infiltrated it, and there were officers passing information to the IRA.³⁶

Finally, in September 1920, before the approval of the Government of Ireland Act, northern unionists obtained from London the establishment of a Special Constabulary. Although the British funded and were officially in control of the Constabulary, since the Belfast government was not allowed to organise police and military forces, its implementation was de facto in unionists' hands. Craig and his government wished to be in absolute control of the Specials, and tried to resist any interference from London.

The Special Constabulary was organised in three classes: A, B and C. A Specials were full-time and paid more or less as the RIC. B Specials were part-time, they received an allowance and were mainly employed in patrolling areas where they lived. Whereas A and B Specials were fully armed, the C Specials, a reserve force, were given gun licenses.

Between November 1920 and early 1921, 1,500 men joined the A Specials.³⁷ The vast majority of the recruits came from the UVF, and some from Orange Lodges.

³⁴ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Notes on Special Constabulary).

³⁵ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Notes on police and military forces in rural and border areas of Northern Ireland).

³⁶ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), pp. 13-4.

³⁷ M. Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State* (London, 1976), p. 36.

Data about the Special Constabulary, and the B force in particular, is scarce because men were recruited locally: since they knew each other, details about their employment and military experience were seldom recorded.³⁸ However, the fact that the UVF did not completely merge with the Special Constabulary, and the two competed for recruitment is proved by the continuing existence of the Volunteers. They carried out an effective patrolling and, in some cases, intelligence work, but were also involved in sectarian murders in Derry city between May and June 1920.³⁹ In general, however, the UVF did not play a major role in sectarian riots, nor did the Volunteers really engage in the war against the IRA.

Towards the end of 1921, old leaders of the UVF took action to secretly reorganise and strengthen the force.⁴⁰ Initially, they acted against the wishes of the Belfast government, which feared that the reorganisation of the UVF would antagonise the British and provoke the IRA, possibly leading to a breach of the truce. However, when the government became aware of the reorganisation of the UVF, the Divisional Police Commissioner, Lieutenant-Colonel Wickham, wrote a letter to the RIC County Inspectors and Constabulary County Commandants informing them that Craig meant to enrol new Volunteers in a particular class of C Specials. In his letter, Wickham stated that “owing to the number of reports which has been received as to the growth of unauthorised loyalist defence forces, the government have under consideration the desirability of obtaining the services of the best elements of these organisations”.⁴¹

However, the letter was intercepted by republicans and published in the press, thus showing that the Belfast government tolerated the growth of unauthorised loyalist forces during the truce. This caused great embarrassment to Craig, who found it hard to justify Wickham’s letter before the British government. In the end, however, the newly recruited Volunteers were integrated into the police forces, although not the military. An illegal initiative aimed at creating a paramilitary force composed exclusively of Protestants was once again sanctioned by the authorities.

³⁸ T. Bowman, *Carson’s Army. The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-1922* (Manchester, 2007), p. 195.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴⁰ A. Hezlet, *The “B” Specials* (London, 1972), p. 50.

⁴¹ *The Irish Bulletin*, 18 November 1921.

As the UVF struggled to survive, the implementation of the Special Constabulary proceeded. Unlike the Volunteers, A and B Specials were paid to discharge their duties, and thus the number of applicants for these positions was higher than for the UVF. Sir Ernest Clark, Assistant Under-Secretary to the Belfast government, personally established guidelines for recruitment, recommending that “only men of unquestionable fidelity and efficiency” were accepted.⁴² In *A State under Siege*, Bryan Follis argues that selection committees were very severe and rejected candidates who “lacked a sufficiently good character”.⁴³ On the other hand, nationalists held a radically different opinion: in *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogroms*, G. B. Kenna, a pseudonym of Father John Hassan, Catholic priest at St Mary’s in Belfast, asserts that the Specials were recruited from “the dregs of society”.⁴⁴ Nationalists and republicans were not alone in their criticism of the Special Constabulary. Sir Arthur Solly-Flood, Military Adviser of the Belfast government, was very critical of the B Specials, and complained about “their lack of commanders, discipline and training”.⁴⁵

In June 1922, Sir Stephen Tallents, British civil servant and public relations expert, arrived in Belfast to investigate the situation on behalf of Winston Churchill, then Secretary of State for the Colonies.⁴⁶ During his visit, Tallents met with several representatives of the Protestant and Catholic communities, government and military officers, and city councillors. In his final report, he expressed concern about the present and future situation of the military and police forces in Northern Ireland. He was particularly critical of the Special Constabulary because selecting committees were incapable of excluding “undesirables”.⁴⁷ Almost all those who had lost their jobs due to the economic crisis applied to join the A Specials, whereas in several areas young Protestants who initially refused to enlist were coerced by extremists.⁴⁸ Although the USC contributed to establishing police control over the whole territory of Northern Ireland, as tens of stations that had been abandoned by the RIC were re-opened in late 1920 and early 1921, Tallents believed that, due to their lack of

⁴² B. A. Follis, *A State under Siege* (Oxford, 1995), p. 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ G. B. Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogroms* (Dublin, 1922), p. 97.

⁴⁵ P. Bew, P. Gibbon and H. Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921-2001, Political Forces and Social Classes* (London, 2002), p. 29.

⁴⁶ S. Constantine, ‘Tallents, Sir Stephen George (1884–1958)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁴⁷ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Notes on police and military forces in rural and border areas of Northern Ireland).

⁴⁸ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Report).

discipline and preparation, the B Specials did not provide any effective protection and were unsuited to border defence.⁴⁹

Despite widespread concern, Craig and his government decided to strengthen the Special force in response to negotiations between the British government and representatives of the Provisional government in Dublin. As unionists feared an attack from the South and did not trust their London ally, a few days before the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, Craig announced that he planned to increase the number of all the Specials. At the time, 2,466 A Specials and 15,944 B Specials were operative; in a few months, an additional 700 A Specials and 5,000 B Specials were recruited.⁵⁰

Only in early 1922 did the British government fully devolve control of the security forces to the Belfast government.⁵¹ From 1 June 1922, the Special Constabulary became the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC), officially under the control of the new regular police force of the Six Counties, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which maintained the same structure of the RIC. Relations between the Specials and the RIC had been tense, since the former believed the latter to be infiltrated by republicans. Even before the official establishment of the Special Constabulary, Ulster Volunteers refused to co-operate with the RIC. When the IRA attacked the RIC barrack at Newtownhamilton (Armagh), a numerous UVF contingent in the immediate vicinity did not offer any assistance. The same happened in Crossgar (Down).⁵² Specials occasionally refused to report to the RIC, and co-operation between the two forces was difficult. After the creation of the RUC, relations seemed to improve, although there were occasional frictions. In summer 1922, the Inspector General of the RUC gave instructions prohibiting B Specials from making searches for arms on their own authority, after he had received several complaints about the behaviour of the part-time force.⁵³ However, B Specials did not follow RUC instructions and continued searching autonomously.

⁴⁹ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Notes on police and military forces in rural and border areas of Northern Ireland).

⁵⁰ B. A. Follis, *A State under Siege* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 86-87.

⁵¹ T. Bowman, *Carson's Army* (Manchester, 2007), p. 200.

⁵² Statement by John McCoy, BMH, pp. 67-8.

⁵³ A. Hezlet, *The "B" Specials* (London, 1972), p. 93.

The RUC was meant to be more numerous than the A Specials as its membership was planned to reach 3,000 men. Initially, it was proposed that one third of the new force be constituted by Catholics but subsequently the proposal was dropped.⁵⁴ Only 400 Catholics, all of them ex-RIC, joined the force, and in the following years, their number decreased.⁵⁵ By 1925, there were two Catholic county inspectors out of eight, and nine out of thirty-eight district inspectors.⁵⁶ Whereas the number of Catholics in the RUC was scarce, they were absent from the USC. A few applied to join the A Specials, but most of them were rejected because they were generally regarded as disloyal.⁵⁷ Witnesses reported that, although arrangements for mixed drills were made, local Specials' commanders refused to swear in Catholics.⁵⁸ Although unionist leaders discouraged recruitment outside the Protestant community, Hezlet claims that Clark offered to form Catholic units to patrol nationalist areas, but the initiative was unsuccessful due to intimidation by republicans. According to Hezlet, the Constabulary "became an almost completely Protestant force, not because the government desired this, but because practically every Roman Catholic organisation in Ireland discouraged their members from joining".⁵⁹

The British government was anxious to have some Catholics joining the Specials in order to rebut allegations of sectarianism. During a private meeting with three Catholic businessmen from Belfast on 2 June 1922, Winston Churchill asked if they could persuade around 2,000 men from their community to act as Specials. He was told that "not a single Catholic would now join the Specials, who have come to be regarded as a sectarian force. If they joined they would be in danger of their lives".⁶⁰ As Hezlet claimed, the IRA actively discouraged Catholics from joining the Specials, not only through intimidation but also through violence. On 4 December 1920, Constable J. Mallough, a Catholic ex-RIC who had joined the Special Constabulary, was attacked by masked men while at home on leave. They asked if he was a Catholic and after he confirmed, they shot and wounded him.⁶¹

⁵⁴ R. Doherty, *The Thin Green Line* (Barnsley, 2012), p. 16.

⁵⁵ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Talk with Major General Solly-Flood, 23.6.1922).

⁵⁶ R. Doherty, *The Thin Green Line* (Barnsley, 2012), p. 21.

⁵⁷ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), p. 50.

⁵⁸ TNA, CO906/26 (Stephen Tallents papers, Talk with General Ricardo, 26.6.1922).

⁵⁹ A. Hezlet, *The "B" Specials* (London, 1972), p. 23.

⁶⁰ TNA, CO906/25 (Correspondence between officials and Catholics, Belfast, June 1922. Minute of meeting between Churchill, Fisher, Smith and deputation of Burke, Dougal and Hughes).

⁶¹ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 11 December 1920.

Peculiar circumstances led a Catholic man from Tyrone to join the USC. Shortly before the signing of the first Craig-Collins Pact, Specials attacked a house where IRA men were hiding in Loughmacrory, near Carrickmore. One of them, a man named Hagan, was wounded and captured. He revealed the names of his companions under torture, and two of them were arrested. After swearing against them during the trial, Hagan joined the Special Constabulary for a short period, but then left the country.⁶²

- **Northern Catholics and military forces**

As the vast majority of northern Catholics did not wish to live in a unionist-ruled state, their hostility to the government and its institutions, including police forces, was predictable, but resentment against the Special Constabulary was particularly deep. In *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogroms*, Specials are described as “Orange hordes – pogromists, looters, incendiaries and untried murderers a good portion of them (...) as a body, their misdeeds surpass the worst that was ever anticipated”.⁶³

The Specials were active in border areas, patrolling roads and blowing up bridges to prevent IRA men from entering Northern Ireland, and searching the houses of suspected republicans. They were often accused of mistreating women and children and destroying furniture during their searches. Michael O’Donoghue, engineer officer of the IRA in Donegal, asserted that in Derry and Tyrone Specials “were notoriously savage in their treatment of local men suspected of aiding the IRA”, who were often beaten up, maimed and tortured after their arrest.⁶⁴ There were also complaints about drunkenness and their discipline was often questioned. Only in those areas where Protestants were in a minority and scattered were Specials careful to avoid serious trouble. For example, in Warrenpoint district, between 1920 and ’21, local B men repeatedly molested Father McGinn by placing stones on the roads where he used to cycle. After McGinn was provided armed guards by the IRA, the B Specials ceased to molest him.⁶⁵

⁶² Statement by Sean Corr, BMH, p. 19.

⁶³ G. B. Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogroms* (Dublin, 1922), pp. 54-5.

⁶⁴ Statement by Michael O’Donoghue, BMH, p. 255.

⁶⁵ Statement by Peadar Barry, BMH, p. 10.

In general, Specials were involved in violent confrontations with the IRA in a spiral of retaliation that did not spare civilians. A new IRA campaign in Northern Ireland intensified between May and June 1922, and the Specials became one of the main targets. Tallents noted that the RUC too was regarded as a partisan force, and police officers were often attacked. It is possible that in some cases RUC men were mistaken for Specials, since their uniforms were very similar. Between 24 March and 17 June, twenty-one members of the RUC and USC were killed in Northern Ireland.⁶⁶ B Specials' families and properties were also targeted. For example, in October '21, a rick hay property of the father of two B Specials was set on fire in Fermanagh, and several members of the force received threatening letters.⁶⁷ In some cases, Specials' houses were raided for arms. In July 1922, ten Specials from Belcoo barracks in Fermanagh were kidnapped by the Irregulars, and kept in Dundalk Military barracks until the Free State army liberated them.⁶⁸

The Belfast government responded by reinforcing the militarisation of its territory, after the British agreed to provide more arms and equipment for the Specials. Additional B Specials were mobilised for full-time duty: 778 men in Belfast, 820 in county Down and 1,060 in Fermanagh.⁶⁹ Shotguns were given to civilian watchmen guarding public buildings at night. Interment and the proscription of the IRA led to hundreds of arrests. In June, most of the internees, the vast majority of whom were Catholics, were transferred from Belfast Gaol to the prison ship *Argenta*. Among those arrested, there were several Sinn Féin leaders, such as Cahir Healy, but also professional men such as doctors and lawyers who, despite their republican sympathies, had no connection with the IRA.⁷⁰

Specials regularly carried out reprisals against IRA attacks. In May 1922, a group of 300 B Specials marched into the small village of Desertmartin in county Derry, raided and set on fire a great number of Catholic houses, and killed four men after dragging them out of their beds.⁷¹ The news echoed across the country: the *Southern Star* titled "Shocking Ulster Crimes", the *Irish Independent* described the events as "Terror in South Derry", whereas the

⁶⁶ TNA, CO906/25 (Correspondence between officials and Catholics, Belfast, June 1922. Return – consolidated – murders in Belfast and Six Counties for period from 24.3.22 to 17.6.22).

⁶⁷ TNA, CO906/19: telegrams.

⁶⁸ TNA, CO906/21: telegrams.

⁶⁹ B. A. Follis, *A State under Siege* (Oxford, 1995), p. 100.

⁷⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 223.

⁷¹ *The Freeman's Journal*, 29 May 1922.

Freeman's Journal wrote about the "Sack of Desertmartin". It seems that the turmoil that followed the events in Desertmartin did not persuade Specials to act with more restraint. Shortly afterwards they crossed the border from Fermanagh to Donegal and terrorised the inhabitants of Lettercran. A second attempt by the Specials led to a serious confrontation with local IRA men, and the former had to retreat.⁷² The attack against the Mater hospital in Belfast on the night of 5 June became one of the most famous acts of reprisal, although it did not result in any fatalities. As in most similar cases, B Specials were responsible for the attack, which contributed to gain them the worst reputation of all Crown forces in Northern Ireland.

During his enquiry, Tallents interviewed General Ambrose Ricardo, an Englishman of Jewish descent, who served in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. After his retirement, Ricardo settled in Tyrone where he helped organise and train the Ulster Volunteers.⁷³ Despite his firm opposition to Home Rule and support for the Belfast government, he believed that Craig's security policy was undermining future peace in Northern Ireland. He claimed that "there can never be any possibility of establishing confidence and security so long as the B force, the ordinary Protestant countrymen and in many cases corner boy, is supplied with arms and clothing by his government and authorised to get on top of as it were of his R. C. neighbours".⁷⁴ Ricardo reported that it was common practice among B Special constables to visit a prominent nationalist in their district and propose a deal. The constable undertook to control his men, but showed a list of local Catholics to the nationalist with his name on top, and informed him that if something happened to the B Specials there, those on the list would suffer the consequences, starting with the one on top.

Frequent abuses by B Specials led even the most moderate constitutional nationalists to resent the government, particularly since those responsible for raids and murders were never prosecuted. In fact, authorities could get no evidence to make arrests because the Specials systematically intimidated witnesses. Since authorities were almost powerless against the abuses of the B Specials, Tallents was afraid that it would have been impossible

⁷² Statement by John Travers, BMH, p. 4.

⁷³ S. Nimmons, 'A Sephardic Commander in Ireland', *The Times of Israel*, 19 July 2013.

⁷⁴ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Notes by an ex-District Commandant).

to disarm the men once the situation in the North was calm.⁷⁵ This was particularly dangerous considering the high percentage of Protestant men serving as B Specials. According to Tallents' estimates, one in four able bodied Protestant men was a member of the USC in June 1922.⁷⁶

In his memoirs edited by his grandson, John McKenna, a Catholic RIC officer who retired in 1921, recalled a few episodes involving Specials in Tyrone. He spent his last years of service in Cookstown, where Protestant officers often discriminated against him. McKenna recalled that one night in May 1921, during a raid near Cookstown, a young Catholic named Joseph Hayden was killed and his brother wounded. Although the survivor reported that the authors of the raid were B Specials in uniform, the District Inspector arrested only one man, a farmer neighbour of the deceased, in order to shield the Specials. Shortly after his arrest, the farmer wrote a letter to the DI that was intercepted by McKenna. In the letter, he lamented that his farm was being neglected due to his absence and, though he claimed to be ready to "do as much for the cause" as the DI himself, he reminded the officer of his innocence and asked to be released.⁷⁷ McKenna gave the letter to the County Inspector, and eventually the man was freed. Five B Specials involved in the murder were taken to Derry gaol and released on bail, but never prosecuted.

In a number of cases, it appears that the Specials acted on their own initiative and their actions were not sanctioned by the RUC and the government initially. Even James Craig acknowledged that at least some individuals among the Specials were dangerous. In a telegram to the Irish Office sent in March 1922, Craig admitted that B Specials in Caledon (Tyrone), recently involved in a fire exchange across the border, were "hot headed and anxious to take the law into their hands".⁷⁸ He added that a few days before this incident, B Specials had removed the furniture from the houses of local Catholics and dumped it on the border. Nevertheless, northern authorities always proved themselves ready to justify the

⁷⁵ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Notes on police and military forces in rural and border areas of Northern Ireland).

⁷⁶ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Interview with Major General Solly Flood, 23.6.22).

⁷⁷ J. McKenna, *A Beleaguered Station* (Ulster Historical Foundation, 2009), pp. 57-8.

⁷⁸ TNA, CO906/20 (Telegrams, Telegram from Sir James Craig to the Secretary of State, Irish Office, 24 Mar. 1922).

Special Constabulary, and avoided questioning their actions publicly. The case of the Mansion House and Park in Clogher illustrates this dynamic.

On 8 February 1922, 120 Specials seized the Mansion House and surrounding Park in Clogher (Tyrone), which had been recently purchased by Bishop Patrick McKenna. The area was the ancient foundation of the patron saint of Clogher Diocese, St Macartan, and the Bishop was outraged by what he saw as a deliberate aggression motivated by religious intolerance. After legal advisers assured him that there was no warrant for such a seizure under the “partition act”, the Bishop decided to take action and wrote a bitter letter in which he pointed out that if accommodation for the “raiders” was really needed, they could have seized the disused workhouse of Clogher. The property belonged to the unionist MP William Coote, who, the Bishop believed, would have been glad to assist the Specials.⁷⁹

Instead of addressing his letter to the northern government, the Bishop wrote to Viscount FitzAlan, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, an English Catholic who had been appointed viceroy in April 1921.⁸⁰ It is likely that the Bishop appealed to the Lord Lieutenant in the hope that a Catholic would be more sympathetic to him than the northern government, and expecting FitzAlan to act as an intermediary. However, he was disappointed as the Lord Lieutenant replied: “I believe the authorities are not only entitled, but under conditions now existing, are bound to seize private dwellings for occupation by the military or police. The proximity of Clogher to the border line (...), have no doubt, rendered this occupation necessary”.⁸¹

Although he quickly dismissed the Bishop, FitzAlan did get in touch with northern authorities to have the matter investigated. In his letter to the northern Prime Minister, he expressed concern, for the Mansion House had some fine fittings which could be damaged, and asked: “Do you think it is true, as stated by the Bishop, that there is an empty workhouse in close proximity? It certainly seems, on paper, that this would have been a more suitable place for a barrack. However, I only mention these things in detail for your own information in case you may have any opportunity of having the place restored to the

⁷⁹ PRONI, CAB/9/G/64/1 (Alleged occupation Clogher, Correspondence between Patrick McKenna Bishop of Clogher to Viscount FitzAlan, Lord Lieutenant, 15 Feb. 1922).

⁸⁰ J. Ramsden, Howard, ‘Edmund Bernard Fitzalan’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁸¹ PRONI, CAB/9/G/64/1 (Alleged occupation Clogher, Correspondence between Patrick McKenna Bishop of Clogher to Viscount FitzAlan, Lord Lieutenant, 17 Feb. 1922).

Bishop, without inconvenience to the public necessity of the time”.⁸² It is significant that the Lord Lieutenant first replied to the Bishop, refusing to help him, and only after investigated the matter, acknowledging that seizure of the property might have been inappropriate.

After the northern Prime Minister started to gather information about the seizure, a memorandum encouraged the northern government to purchase the Mansion House and Park in Clogher for strategic reasons.⁸³ The author of the memorandum was Hugh de Fellenberg Montgomery of Blessingbourne (Tyrone), a unionist member of the Senate of Northern Ireland. Craig did not mention the memorandum in his reply to FitzAlan, but instead justified the seizure with the fact that there had been a number of kidnappings in Clogher, and that they wanted to strengthen their control in the area. He added that the old workhouse mentioned by the Bishop was being used as a woollen mill and hospital, and finally assured FitzAlan that, despite the suggestion in the memorandum, they intended to return the property to the Bishop as soon as law and order were restored.⁸⁴

In March 1923, the government agreed to contact the trustees of Clogher Mansion House in the attempt to persuade them to sell it. It is not clear if the property was purchased, but it was retained as USC headquarters for motor transport until 1926. After the collapse of the Boundary Commission and the disbandment of the A Specials, the government agreed to surrender the property.⁸⁵ At this time, the Free State was no longer seen as a threat, but it is significant that northern authorities did not mention the strategic importance of Clogher Mansion House, and justified its occupation in the previous four years only with the necessity to lodge USC vehicles. There is no evidence that the Diocese ever received compensation for the occupation of Clogher Mansion House.

The cases of Cookstown and Clogher show that authorities were ready to help the Specials to cover-up their mistakes and crimes, but also to indulge in personal vendettas as they did with James Gillespie. A firm supporter of Sinn Féin, Gillespie was doctor and district coroner in Cookstown (Tyrone). In the case of the murder of Joseph Hayden mentioned by John

⁸² PRONI, CAB/9/G/64/1 (Alleged occupation Clogher, Correspondence between FitzAlan and the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, 18 Feb. 1922).

⁸³ PRONI, CAB/9/G/64/1 (Alleged occupation Clogher, Memorandum about Clogher palace and park).

⁸⁴ PRONI, CAB/9/G/64/1 (Alleged occupation Clogher, Correspondence between FitzAlan, the Vice Regal Lodge, Dublin, and the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Mar. 1922).

⁸⁵ PRONI, CAB/9/G/64/1 (Alleged occupation Clogher, Correspondence between Dawson-Bates and the Prime Minister, Jan. 1926).

McKenna, Gillespie recommended to the DI that an inquest be held, but his suggestion was rejected.⁸⁶ In early 1922, he wrote to Michael Collins asking him to demand the demobilisation of the B Specials who were raiding, insulting and assaulting innocent people. He had personally treated a number of civilians injured by the B men, and had come to the conclusion that they were there not to bring peace but to annihilate Catholics' determination to end partition.⁸⁷ Gillespie was interned on the prison ship *Argenta* in May 1922, and after his release left Cookstown and moved to Wexford. It seems that his decision was motivated by threats he received from local Specials who learnt about his correspondence with Collins.

It was only towards the end of 1922, when the situation in Northern Ireland was slowly normalising, that Gillespie wrote to the Minister for Home Affairs Dawson Bates, asking if he could return to Cookstown and live in peace. His request was submitted to Cookstown authorities, and a meeting of influential figures agreed to allow Gillespie to return and continue his practice. However, as soon as he arrived, he was taken to the USC headquarters where he was told that it was dangerous for him to live in Cookstown. He was advised to sleep at USC headquarters until the parties adverse to him got used to his presence. At Gillespie's refusal, the RUC District Inspector contacted the County Inspector in Omagh, a Catholic, who agreed to speak to the B men on his behalf.

It appears that the RUC and part of the Specials were ready to tolerate Gillespie's return, and did not see him as a threat. At the time, Gillespie was 48 years old and from his correspondence with the authorities, it seems that his main concern was to return to his practice. When he was asked to apologise to the B men for what he had said about them he refused, but agreed to sign a paper saying he was not going to undertake any political work. Despite this statement and the support of the County Inspector, a few days after his arrival to Cookstown, Gillespie was taken to Crumlin road jail in Belfast, and detained. He decided to surrender and informed Dawson Bates that he was ready to return to Wexford. He was released and barred from returning to Tyrone and Londonderry.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *The Irish News*, 20 May 1921.

⁸⁷ NAI, DE/2/338 (Letter from James Gillespie to Michael Collins, 11 Feb. 1922).

⁸⁸ NAI, NEBB/1/1/13 (Northern Minority, Letter from James Gillespie to Minister for Home Affairs, 12 Dec. 1922).

Subsequently, Gillespie made several representations to Free State authorities asking for help, to which he believed he was entitled due to his commitment to the nationalist cause: “practically everyone in a radius of 20 miles round Cookstown knows how I stood out in the national struggle, and that in a mixed population like that of Cookstown, where, as you know, it wasn’t the same as standing out in the South”.⁸⁹ However, it seems that he did not receive any help from the Free State, which was generally reluctant to contact the northern government. Gillespie’s expulsion from Northern Ireland appeared to be motivated by resentment among the Specials caused by his statements. In fact, the Minister for Home Affairs and the RUC did not object to his return initially, but in the end acquiesced to the Specials’ requests.

Collusion between USC and the authorities not only guaranteed impunity to officers responsible for all sort of legal violations, but in some cases contributed to the perpetration of crimes. For example, according to John McKenna, the situation in Cookstown and the surrounding area was generally quiet, thus the Specials carried out bogus attacks in collusion with the RUC in order to justify their presence. One night, a girl who was employed as servant in the house of the RIC District Inspector had her hair cut off. Although she could not identify her assailants, the day after the attack the District Inspector called A platoons from Magherafelt and Dungannon to help the local RIC and B Specials in their searches of Catholic houses in Cookstown. When McKenna asked the DI what they were searching for, since they had no information about the assailants, he was replied: “Oh you know Head, we must do something to keep the B men quiet”.⁹⁰ McKenna’s report about bogus ambushes, as well as misbehaviour of the Specials, was confirmed by different sources. During his investigation, Tallents interviewed a man called Robert Stevenson, who explained that his resignation from the B Specials was due to the fact that they “invented” ambushes to justify their carrying on intrusive and harassing searches.⁹¹

In comparison with the RUC and the A Specials, B men received little training, as they were a part-time force. In her memoirs, Lady Mabel recalls the arrival of a Specials’ unit to protect her and her Big House in Castlewellan (Down) in May 1922: “by the light of day the garrison

⁸⁹ NAI, NEBB/1/1/13 (Northern Minority, Catholics in public positions).

⁹⁰ J. McKenna, *A Beleaguered Station* (Ulster Historical Foundation, 2009), p. 40.

⁹¹ TNA, CO906/26 (Stephen Tallents papers, Report of talk with Stevenson, General Ricardo and Perceval Maxwell by Stephen Tallents, 29.6.1922).

of the Specials was not a very imposing one”.⁹² An Englishman who came to inspect them was disappointed at noticing that they kept under their mattresses a combination of jams, Mills bombs and shirts. When the house was eventually attacked, however, the Specials behaved well.

Many of those who joined the force were anxious to be involved in action. For example, in a letter to his mother, C. E. Duffin, a young man who had just joined the Specials in Belfast, lamented that his work was very dull merely consisting in going on patrol with policemen and moving on crowds of youths in the evening. Occasionally, they arrested those who broke the curfew.⁹³ The inability or unwillingness of the government to control the Specials, and the impunity that B men enjoyed, likely increased the risk of abuses. In his final report, Tallents warned that “at any moment, a massacre by “B” men in a locality is possible with results beyond calculation”.⁹⁴

Although they enjoyed a better reputation than the B men, the fact that A Specials served mostly away from their own localities did not guarantee their impartiality. In his report, Tallents stated that he was informed about some episodes of good conduct by the A Specials, although he did not specify any. On the other hand, an episode occurred in Dromintee (Armagh) in mid-June 1922 that was serious enough to attract the attention of Michael Collins, who informed Winston Churchill.⁹⁵ Eight men, reportedly A Specials from Forkhill barracks, broke into the house and shop of James McGuill, Sinn Féin county councillor. They tried and failed to open the money safe, thus they started torturing and beating the four women of the house for the keys. According to a telegram sent to Churchill upon request of Collins, they tried to rape one of the servants but failed because the other women defended her. The same night in South Armagh, two men were taken prisoners by A Specials in full uniform and murdered.

The day after receiving this telegram, the Irish Office in London reported the incident to Colonel Spender, then Secretary to the government of Northern Ireland, and among those responsible for the organisation of the USC. The Irish Office claimed that the Specials raped

⁹² M. Annesley, *As the sight is bent, an unfinished autobiography* (London, 1964), p. 30.

⁹³ P. Buckland, *Irish Unionism* (Dublin, 1972), vol. 2, p. 163.

⁹⁴ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Notes on police and military forces in rural and border areas of Northern Ireland).

⁹⁵ TNA, CO906/21 (Telegrams, Telegram from Cope to Churchill, 20 June 1922).

one woman and attempted to rape another, and concluded by stressing that Churchill expected the northern government to “institute an enquiry by some responsible and impartial investigation”.⁹⁶ The incident in Dromintee was not mentioned in the press. It is likely that reporting a case of rape, even if only attempted, would have been considered indecent. In statements from the Bureau of Military History rape is seldom mentioned.⁹⁷ John McCoy, IRA Commandant in county Armagh, recalled that the raid on McGuill’s house was particularly violent, as the women were terrorised and beaten by masked men, but did not talk about attempted rape.⁹⁸

Reports of misbehaviour and abuses by the USC against Catholic civilians were numerous. A significant exception is represented by John Martin Regan, a Catholic born and raised in Belfast, son of an RIC officer. Regan joined the RIC and then the RUC, and by the time he retired in 1948 was head of County Down police, “the highest-ranking Catholic officer in the RUC in its first 25 years”.⁹⁹ He took charge of Tyrone in 1922, and in his memoirs he recalled that he and the Specials’ county commandant got along very well and worked in close liaison. Although he admitted that it was hard to maintain discipline among the B Specials, and occasionally among the A men too, he reported few complaints. After nine years in Tyrone, Regan moved to county Down. Here too, according to his report, the B Specials were very well disciplined.¹⁰⁰

- **Decline of violence in Northern Ireland**

While the Civil War raged in the Free State, the IRA campaign in the North was almost dead by 1923. Violence in the Six Counties reached its peak between March and June 1922, with 80 murders and 58 attempted murders in May alone, whereas in the first three months of 1923 only two people were killed.¹⁰¹ However, the northern government remained vigilant and it was not until July 1924 that they agreed to mitigate the enforcement of the curfew,

⁹⁶ TNA, CO906/21 (Telegrams, Telegram from Curtis to Spender, 21 June 1922).

⁹⁷ D. Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble* (London, 2015), p. 210.

⁹⁸ Statement by John McCoy, BMH, p. 161.

⁹⁹ J. Augusteijn (ed.), *The Memoirs of John M. Regan* (Dublin, 2007), p. 8.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁰¹ PRONI, MIC523/21 (Return showing the number of murders and attempted murders committed in NI each month since 22 November 1921 to March 1923 inclusive).

and it was finally abolished on 30 December of the same year. Moreover, most of the internees on the *Argenta* were not released until 1924, and many believed that they were detained long after the security situation required it. Alex Donnelly, republican solicitor in Tyrone, claimed that a significant number of Catholics holding public positions were interned and dismissed from their posts with no charge so that positions could be available for unionists. According to the North Eastern Boundary Bureau, established by the Free State government to prepare evidence in support of the nationalist case before the Boundary Commission, there were nine teachers, three doctors, three post office officers, one school attendant officer, one accountant for Fermanagh council, and one solicitor for Killeel rural council interned on the *Argenta* in 1923.¹⁰²

The northern government was concerned about the Boundary Commission envisaged by the Anglo-Irish Treaty, whose task was to redraw the border between North and South of Ireland according to the wishes of the inhabitants. Although the terms under which the Commission was to operate were vaguely defined, and despite reassurances by the British, northern unionists saw it as threat to the existence of Northern Ireland. In the Free State, the government was cautious, but northern Catholics, in particular those living in border areas, hoped to be transferred south. Some argued that the Commission would significantly reduce the territory of Northern Ireland, ultimately undermining its viability and leading inexorably to the end of partition.

The Inspector General of the RUC prepared plans to defend Northern Ireland against a possible attack from the Free State, and the scheme heavily relied upon the USC. The B Specials in particular were responsible for the defence of the border. Thus Craig rejected suggestions, such as that of the Military Adviser of the Belfast government Solly-Flood, that the USC be replaced with a smaller permanent police force. The suggestion was motivated by the high cost of the USC: A and B Specials were very expensive, the latter costing around £250,000 per year.¹⁰³ In 1924, the British government, for the first time led by Labour, started to question the necessity of the USC. However, after the government collapsed in

¹⁰² NAI, NEBB/1/1/13 (Northern Minority, Notes).

¹⁰³ A. Hezlet, *The "B" Specials* (London, 1972), p. 95.

October 1924, and elections brought the Conservatives back to power, Churchill agreed to continue funding the Specials.

By this stage, the situation in Northern Ireland had improved and the Civil War in the South was over. However, there was occasional tension along the border, and the Specials were once again involved. On 18 May 1924, a farmer called Eugene Monaghan was standing on the Monaghan side of Annie's Bridge, on the border with Fermanagh. A lorry of Specials under the command of Captain Dunne arrived and asked him to come speak with them. After Monaghan refused, since he did not want to cross the border, two Specials entered the Free State to drag him into Northern Ireland. Dunne struck him knocking his plate of false teeth askew and causing him to bleed. Then they took him to a shed and struck him again. Finally, Dunne made Monaghan swear that he would not report what happened to the authorities otherwise he would kill him and his neighbour Crozier.¹⁰⁴ It was Crozier, a Protestant, who wrote to General O'Duffy, Monaghan born Commissioner of the Civic Guard, to report the assault on Eugene Monaghan. Crozier added that he had been repeatedly threatened by captain Dunne not to cross the border, and finally sold his farm in Fermanagh because he was afraid of the Specials.¹⁰⁵

Eoin MacNeill, Free State representative in the Boundary Commission, was asked to consider the advisability of making representations to the British government. Crozier's allegations seemed a good opportunity to strengthen the nationalist case before the Boundary Commission since he was a Protestant. Following MacNeill's advice, Cosgrave agreed to make a representation to the Colonial Office in London.¹⁰⁶ Free State officials did not even consider the possibility of making a representation to the northern government, and although they repeated that the matter was urgent, it was not until mid-August, after collecting sworn statements by Monaghan and Crozier, that they got in touch with London.

The letter, that J. H. Thomas, Secretary of State for the Colonies, forwarded to Belfast authorities, reported the events in detail, commenting: "Incidents of this nature can scarcely be regarded as being otherwise than provocative. (...) The utmost courtesy and good feeling

¹⁰⁴ PRONI, CAB/9/G/41 (Alleged ill treatment of Eugene Monaghan, Statement by Eugene Monaghan, Annie's, Clones, Monaghan).

¹⁰⁵ NAI, TAOIS/S3863 (Case of Eugene Monaghan, Letter from John Crozier to General O'Duffy, 22 May 1924).

¹⁰⁶ NAI, TAOIS/S3863 (Case of Eugene Monaghan, Correspondence).

should exist between officers of both governments and the people resident in the vicinity of the northern boundary”.¹⁰⁷ In October, Lt. Col. W. B. Spender replied to the Colonial Office for the Northern Ireland government dismissing all charges against the Specials. The government conducted a full enquiry resulting in a different version of events. Eugene Monaghan had travelled across the border several times, and Specials suspected he was an Irregular. On 18 May, a patrol found him in northern territory, searched him and then let him go safe. Spender stated that, since the version given by Dunne and his men and that of Monaghan contradicted each other, he was unable to proceed.¹⁰⁸ He concluded by stressing that “the necessity of discharging the duties entrusted to them with tact and courtesy has always been impressed on the police”. The Imperial Secretary forwarded the letter to the Free State government.

- **Budget cuts and disbandment**

On 7 November 1925, the English paper *Morning Post* published leaked notes of the boundary negotiations suggesting minor border adjustments.¹⁰⁹ Northern nationalists were disappointed as the Commission’s preliminary report contemplated only a few areas with Catholic majorities being transferred south, whereas unionists refused to give up even small portions of territory. The resignation of the Free State commissioner resigned hinted that the leaked report was accurate. Finally, in early December, the governments of Northern Ireland, the Free State and United Kingdom agreed to leave the boundary as it was. The Boundary Commission never formally reported.

Less than two weeks after, the partial disbandment of the USC was officially announced, although the question had been under consideration in private between the northern government and Churchill since summer 1925.¹¹⁰ Unionist ministers knew that Northern Ireland alone could not fund the USC, at the time comprising around 33,000 men, but Craig

¹⁰⁷ PRONI, CAB/9/G/41 (Alleged ill treatment of Eugene Monaghan, Letter from Free State President’s Office to J. H. Thomas, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Colonial Office, London, 14 Aug. 1924).

¹⁰⁸ PRONI, CAB/9/G/41 (Alleged ill treatment of Eugene Monaghan, Letter from Spender to the Secretary of State for Home Affairs, 10 Oct. 1924).

¹⁰⁹ F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1963), p. 491.

¹¹⁰ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), p. 252.

tried to negotiate a gradual disbandment.¹¹¹ However, the British government agreed to a final grant, after which the force had to be quickly dismantled. Craig decided to disband the A and C Specials and keep the B Specials in a modified form.

The announcement did not raise much enthusiasm among the Catholic population because the B force, which was the most resented, would continue to exist. Unionists, on the other hand, were anxious, in particular in South Armagh. After the government announced the disbandment of the A and C Specials, Rev John Bentley warned Craig that people in Jonesboro' and Forkhill (Armagh) were to be left without adequate protection. In the area there were many republican ex-internees, and loyalists had already been covertly threatened as to what would happen to them after the disbandment of the USC.¹¹² Even before the disbandment was made official, as early as October 1925, the Tullyhappy Branch of the South Armagh Unionist Association protested against the disarmament of many "respectable and able men", members of the B Specials, in particular those of Divernagh platoon.¹¹³ According to the association, several unarmed loyalist farmers had been murdered before the formation of the B platoon, and they feared that disarmament could result in a resurgence of violence.

The northern government quickly reassured the South Armagh Unionist Association that no general disbandment of the B Specials was on the way, but refused to interfere with the RUC Inspector General's decision to dismiss the Divernagh platoon. It was stressed that, despite repeated warnings "as to the necessity for greater zeal and efficiency in the case of the platoon of Divernagh", it had become necessary, in the interests of the force, to dispense with the services of a number of members of the unit.¹¹⁴ This strongly suggests that discipline was very loose among B Specials in South Armagh, and that disbandment was aimed at preventing trouble.

A Specials particularly resented their disbandment. The government offered two months' pay, but a number of units refused to hand in arms, ammunitions, and equipment until their

¹¹¹ D. Harkness, *Northern Ireland since 1920* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 40-1.

¹¹² PRONI, CAB/9/G/26/1 (Disbandment of Specials and questions arising thereon, Letter from Rev John Bentley to Craig, 15 Dec. 1925).

¹¹³ PRONI, CAB/9/G/26/1 (Disbandment of Specials and questions arising thereon, Meeting of Tullyhappy Branch of South Armagh Unionist Association, 12 Oct. 1925).

¹¹⁴ PRONI, CAB/9/G/26/1 (Disbandment of Specials and questions arising thereon, Reply to letter from Craig's secretary, 21 Oct. 1925).

severance demand, £200 for each officer free of income tax, were met.¹¹⁵ A Specials claimed that many of them had given up permanent positions to join the USC since Solly-Flood promised that their appointments would be permanent. Now that they were all 40 or older, they feared it would be hard to find employment, and they demanded government sinecures. They felt that they were fully entitled to their demands because they had restored order in Belfast, and “we are all Ulstermen and have each served as officers in the army during the Great War”.¹¹⁶

Farrell claims that most of the Protestant population did not support the A Specials. At a time of widespread unemployment, many believed that the Specials were too highly paid, and did not identify with a force that had become very professional after years of training, losing their character of “popular Protestant militia”.¹¹⁷ However, the *Irish News* asserted that “the weight of the public opinion would appear to be on the side of the men”, possibly in an attempt to exaggerate the unpopularity of the government among its traditional supporters.¹¹⁸ The lack of strong popular support for the USC might explain why the government firmly rejected their requests, and proceeded to dismantle the force, which eventually accepted dismissal with two months’ pay. At the same time, however, the government realised that ex-C Specials were unwilling to return arms that they had been allowed to keep at home. Instead of confiscating them, the government designed a compromise: they amended the Firearms Act to allow C Specials to keep their arms, but not to carry or use them, even without meeting the requirements for a gun licence. Thus, a significant quantity of arms remained in the hands of Protestants, whereas Catholics were often denied firearms permits by the RUC.¹¹⁹

Since, due to the failure of the Boundary Commission, the existence of Northern Ireland was now secured, and the South was no longer a threat, the Belfast government decided to stop recruitment for the B Specials, and planned to reduce their number. From 1 April 1926, the B Specials ceased to patrol the border, and by March 1927, they were reduced to 14,900

¹¹⁵ PRONI, CAB/9/G/26/1 (Disbandment of Specials and questions arising thereon, Correspondence between Craig and A Specials’ representatives, Dec. 1925).

¹¹⁶ PRONI, CAB/9/G/26/1 (Disbandment of Specials and questions arising thereon, Correspondence between Craig and A Specials’ representatives, Dec. 1925).

¹¹⁷ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), p. 260.

¹¹⁸ *The Irish News*, 17 December 1925.

¹¹⁹ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), pp. 262-1.

men costing £94,347 per year.¹²⁰ By this stage, they had become a reserve force. In 1928, the B Specials were employed only twice: to help the RUC at the first Ulster Tourist Trophy Race, and as ceremonial guard for the visit of the Princess Royal. The average age of the B Specials rose as recruitment was over, and many worried that the government would let the force disappear. Finally, in 1931, financial difficulty persuaded the government to further diminish B Specials engagement: training became voluntary and unpaid, and there was a reduction of officers and staff, but they were allowed to keep their weapons and continue practising.

Despite the firmness with which the government implemented its plan to disband the A and C Specials, and reduced the number of B men, it remained committed to shielding the force against accusations of sectarianism by the nationalist population. Towards the end of the 1920s, sectarian violence increased in Northern Ireland, after some years of relative calm. B Specials were often accused of being involved in riots and clashes. For example, the *Irish News* claimed that they were responsible for a series of attacks against Annahugh Hibernian hall, in Armagh, between 1929 and 1930.¹²¹ Despite evidence produced by the paper, the official inquiry into the destruction of Annahugh hall led to no arrests. On 7 November 1929, after the second time the hall was destroyed, Joe Devlin, leader of the nationalist opposition in the Belfast parliament, complained: "Now we are paying here in this Northern province almost a million a year for police. Not satisfied with £885,000 for the ordinary constabulary force we are paying £77,000 for the "Specials," (...) And yet in this small district where we must have a large number of "Specials," and there must be a large number of constables, they have not been able to detect the perpetrators of this crime".¹²²

It is not clear what caused a resurgence in violence between the late 1920s and the early 1930s. In spring 1932, the *Hibernian Journal* reported that ex B Specials had recently attacked AOH parades and created trouble, hoping that they would be employed again.¹²³ They might have been encouraged by the fact that, since the previous year, the government had agreed to reopen recruitment, after the number of the B men had fallen dramatically.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ A. Hezlet, *The "B" Specials* (London, 1972), p. 114.

¹²¹ *The Irish News*, 28 October 1930.

¹²² Stormont papers, Vol. 11, col. 1111 – 1112. 7 Nov. 1929.

¹²³ *The Hibernian Journal*, April 1932.

¹²⁴ M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* (London, 1983), p. 266.

It is important to remember that, since its early stages, the USC developed as a system of patronage at a time of deep economic crisis and unemployment following the end of the First World War. The unemployment rate in Northern Ireland in 1922 was 23% and although it decreased to 17.2% in 1928, it increased again reaching 28% by 1931.¹²⁵ With the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, for many B Specials their allowance became an important supplement to their salary.¹²⁶ Reports from different sources claiming that there was little or nothing to do for the Specials seem to confirm that they were not only a response to internal and external threats.

In February 1932, the Free State general elections saw the victory of the “republican Party” Fianna Fáil, which had “established themselves as the leading advocates of Irish unification”.¹²⁷ The northern government sent B Specials to patrol the border, although this initiative was likely aimed at reassuring local Protestants rather than responding to a real threat. Despite their anti-partition rhetoric, Fianna Fáil lacked a short-term plan to unify the country, and after mobilising the B Specials, the northern government did not take any further action.

In conclusion, British toleration of unionist militancy in response to nationalist threats likely encouraged the formation of the USC, which became a system of patronage embedded in society, particularly in rural and border areas. Failure of the northern government to protect Catholics from abuses by the Specials and to investigate their crimes fomented sectarian divisions, contributing to alienating one community from the state they lived in.

Education

- **The education question in Northern Ireland**

For the Catholic Church, control of education was of paramount importance.¹²⁸ Not only in

¹²⁵ E. F. Biagini, *Storia dell'Irlanda dal 1845 ad oggi* (Bologna, 2014), p. 126.

¹²⁶ T. Bowman, *Carson's Army. The Ulster Volunteer Force, 1910-1922* (Manchester, 2007), p. 198.

¹²⁷ J. Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster Question, 1917-1973* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 107-8.

¹²⁸ I. McBride, 'Religion', in R. Bourke and I. McBride (eds.), *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland* (Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 312.

Ireland, but in all states where Catholic schools existed the Church fought to maintain independence against any form of interference by public authorities. For example, from the mid-nineteenth century, Catholics in New York and other urban areas of the east coast implemented a system of parish-based schools, having failed to win public funding.¹²⁹ Although parish-based schools developed slowly due to the scarcity of resources, the Church was determined to offer an educational system alternative to the public one, to ensure that pupils were instructed according to the Catholic doctrine. Another constant source of anxiety for the Church was the content of the curricula delivered in schools. In 1888, the Pope Leo XIII wrote against the separation of Church and State and condemned liberty of teaching:

There can be no doubt that truth alone should imbue the minds of men (...). For this reason it is plainly the duty of all who teach to banish error from the mind, and by sure safeguards to close the entry to all false convictions. From this it follows, as is evident, that the liberty of which We have been speaking is greatly opposed to reason, and tends absolutely to pervert men's minds, in as much as it claims for itself the right of teaching whatever it pleases - a liberty which the State cannot grant without failing in its duty.¹³⁰

Opposition to liberty of teaching characterised the Irish Catholic Church too. Here, since the early 1880s, the Bishops had formed an alliance with the Parliamentary Party (IPP) which was meant to guarantee that MPs would defend the Church interests in Westminster, with particular attention to the question of Catholic higher education.¹³¹ This alliance proved quite effective in ensuring a certain degree of independence to clerically managed schools until the third Home Rule negotiations. As northern Catholics grew alarmed by rumours about partition, the issue of education emerged as one of the main concerns of ecclesiastical authorities.

¹²⁹ D. Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: the History of the New York City Public Schools* (New York, 1988), pp. 33-45; C. F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the republic: common schools and American society, 1780-1860* (New York, 1983), p. 171.

¹³⁰ *Libertas*, Encyclical by Pope Leo XIII given at St. Peter's in Rome, 20 June 1888.
http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_20061888_libertas.html.

¹³¹ E. Larkin, *The Roman Catholic Church in Ireland and the Fall of Parnell, 1888-1891* (Liverpool, 1979), p. xvii, part I, ch. 3.

In 1916, the Church fiercely opposed the Lloyd George scheme for temporary exclusion of the six counties from Home Rule because it envisaged the creation of a parliament in Belfast with power over education.¹³² Cardinal Logue, at the time Primate of Ireland, publicly declared that it would be better to remain under British rule for 50 years than to accept the Lloyd George scheme.¹³³ Although this statement did not specifically refer to education, the relevance of the issue in the partition debate suggests that the Church feared that Ulster unionists would be even less sympathetic governors than the British. The school system established under the Union in the 1830s was non-denominational, but it had been so radically altered piecemeal that by the early twentieth century, it was fragmented and run along sectarian lines.¹³⁴ The system as operated was appreciated by the Church inasmuch as it guaranteed that Catholic children attended schools run by clerics and were taught by teachers trained at Catholic colleges.¹³⁵

However, the Church was occasionally called to resist interference from public authorities. When in the 1910s in the north-east of Ireland and particularly in Belfast, the growth of population led to a shortage of school accommodation, overcrowding began to affect both Protestant and Catholic schools. It seems that the situation of the latter was better because, as the President of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce admitted, Catholics had taken responsibility for providing accommodation to pupils in their hands. However, Catholic schools were not immune from overcrowding. In 1919, when the Belfast Corporation appointed a committee to deal with the situation, representatives of Catholic wards boycotted it, claiming that they had sufficient schools, despite a previous statement by the Catholic Clerical Managers claiming that they needed further accommodation for around 4,000 children.¹³⁶

Although public intervention would have benefited Catholic schools, the Church feared that it would eventually lead to the creation of state schools where Bishops and clerics had no power. This had happened, for example, in France following the education reforms of 1881

¹³² S. Gwynn, *John Redmond's Last Years* (London, 1919), p. 235; D. W. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland, 1898-1921* (Dublin, 1973), pp. 337-8.

¹³³ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 26.

¹³⁴ N. C. Fleming, "Lord Londonderry and Education Reform in 1920s Northern Ireland", *History Ireland*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), p. 36.

¹³⁵ M. Harris, *The Catholic Church and the Foundation of the Northern Irish State* (Cork, 1993), p. 21.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

and '82. The Prime Minister Jules Ferry had established a free, obligatory and secular system of primary education, alternative to the Catholic one. Despite widespread condemnation by French Catholic authorities, the Church had little choice but to compromise and accept the new system.¹³⁷ However, the French case did not imply the universal surrender of its principles on education by the Church. In 1910, Pope Pius X reiterated the necessity for Christian instruction, which was “even more demanded by the existence of those public schools, lacking all religion, where everything holy is ridiculed and scorned. There both teachers' lips and students' ears are inclined to godlessness. We are referring to those schools which are unjustly called neutral or lay. In reality, they are nothing more than the stronghold of the powers of darkness”.¹³⁸

In the early years of Northern Ireland, the Church faced a government opposing clerical management of education, and encouraging principals to transfer their schools to state control by assuring them full funding for building, maintenance, heating and cleaning. The Church was determined to maintain independence, but complained that Catholic schools, most of which were not transferred and remained voluntary, did not receive adequate public funding despite the fact that the children's parents contributed their share of taxes. The Catholic Church was not the only institution that rejected undenominational education: the Protestant churches opposed the government's plan and gradually mounted a vehement campaign that led them to regain partial control of public schools, whereas Catholics continued to oppose the transfer of their institutions to state authority. Acutely conscious that state schools were mutating into de facto Protestant schools, education was a constant source of grievance for Catholics. This section focuses on primary education and the training of teachers, two particularly controversial issues during the period under consideration. Higher and university education were also a source of disagreement between the Church and the government, though to a lesser extent.

¹³⁷ P. Chevallier, *La Séparation de l'Église et de l'École, Jules Ferry et Léon XIII* (Paris, 1981), ch. 6 and 7.

¹³⁸ *Editae saepe*, Encyclical by Pope Pius X given at St. Peter's in Rome, 26 May 1910.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_26051910_editae-saepe.html

- **Lord Londonderry and the Lynn Committee**

In 1921, the newly-elected Prime Minister of Northern Ireland offered the Ministry of Education to Lord Londonderry, a Conservative English MP who had family connections with Irish Unionism. Londonderry was secretary to the Ulster Unionist delegation at the Irish Convention in 1917-18, and had designed a federalist scheme for Ireland, which was quickly dismissed. Although he had knowledge of Irish affairs, his understanding of the education question in Northern Ireland was that of an outsider: he was committed to excluding all churches from any form of control and influence.¹³⁹ Londonderry was acting in accordance with section 5 of the Government of Ireland Act, forbidding the endowment of any religious body with state funds. In other words, in order to receive public funds, schools could not be under denominational control.¹⁴⁰ This entailed radical changes in religious instruction and school management. In September 1921, Londonderry created a Departmental Committee of Enquiry to advise on future education reforms, chaired by Robert John Lynn, Unionist MP for West Belfast.¹⁴¹ On this subcommittee representatives of the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Ireland concocted a scheme to reconcile obligatory religious instruction acceptable to pan-denominational Protestantism with the letter, if not the spirit, of the Government of Ireland Act.¹⁴² In the end, however, their recommendations on religious instructions were ignored by Londonderry.

Representatives of all denominations were invited to join the Committee, but Cardinal Logue forbade Catholics to co-operate with Lynn and his colleagues who, nevertheless, availed of a few opportunities to consider their views. For example, a member of the Committee attended a meeting of primary school teachers in January 1922, where Catholics expressed their reluctance to accept the control of public boards and asked that appointment and dismissal of teachers were reserved to school managers.¹⁴³ Apart from this exception, Catholics refused to make their views known to Lynn and his staff, and rejected invitations from other boards, such as the Joint Urban District Councils of Northern

¹³⁹ A. Jackson, "Stewart, Charles Stewart Henry Vane-Tempest", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹⁴⁰ D. H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity: the Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland, 1920-1950* (Belfast, 1973), p. 65.

¹⁴¹ D. Ferriter, "Lynn, Robert John", DIB.

¹⁴² PRONI, ED/13/1/198B (Papers of the Departmental Committee on the Educational Services in Northern Ireland).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

Ireland.¹⁴⁴ The only Catholic in the Committee was the vice-chairman, A. N. Bonaparte-Wyse, a civil servant from Limerick who had long served as inspector for national schools throughout Ireland. However, he never sought to represent or defend Catholic interests and supported non-denominational education.¹⁴⁵

The refusal of the Catholic hierarchy to send representatives to the Lynn Committee has long been discussed by historians. N. C. Fleming argues that from Logue's refusal to join the Committee "all subsequent problems can be traced".¹⁴⁶ Long before Fleming, D. H. Akenson asserted that Catholic authorities "surrendered their last shred of influence at the very time when the basic character of Ulster's educational development was being determined".¹⁴⁷ Although most historians agree that the refusal to join the Committee was counterproductive, some have pointed out that Lynn was much more anti-Catholic than Londonderry.¹⁴⁸ This likely discouraged Church authorities from engaging in the Committee's work. Moreover, since every denomination was entitled to only one representative, regardless of the number of their adherents, Logue probably suspected that Catholics' instances would have been ignored by Protestant representatives, who were in a majority. Finally, not only was the boycott of the Committee congruent with the traditional policy of the Roman Catholic's hierarchy, which had always rejected any kind of state interference in education matters, but it was consistent with the non-recognition of the Northern Ireland state supported by Sinn Féin and Dublin government.

As Lynn and the members of the Committee continued their work, educational services were transferred to the northern Ministry of Education from 1 February 1922. On this occasion, Londonderry informed school staff in Northern Ireland that he was aware of the difficulties surrounding the question of education, and was working with the Lynn Committee to introduce a properly co-ordinated system, sympathetic to different

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ B. Hourican, "Wyse, Andrew Reginald Nicholas Gerald Bonaparte", DIB.

¹⁴⁶ N. C. Fleming, "Lord Londonderry and Education Reform in 1920s Northern Ireland", in *History Ireland*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), p. 38.

¹⁴⁷ D. H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity: the Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland, 1920-1950* (Belfast, 1973), p. 52.

¹⁴⁸ O. P. Rafferty, *Catholicism in Ulster, 1603-1983* (Dublin, 1994), p. 210; J. Privilege, *Michael Logue and the Catholic Church in Ireland, 1879-1925* (Oxford, 2009), p. 178.

educational interests.¹⁴⁹ Londonderry's message was probably sincere since he was determined to deny privileges to any particular denomination. However, Catholics did not welcome the transfer of educational services, because it raised the issue of teachers' salaries. These were to be paid by the northern administration from 1 February, but many Catholic schools still refused to recognise the state of Northern Ireland. In January, after consultations between Michael Collins and ecclesiastical authorities in the North, the former agreed to finance those Catholic schools rejecting the authority of the Belfast government.¹⁵⁰

Between January and October 1922, around 800 Catholic teachers working in one third of the Catholic primary schools and many secondary schools in the North refused payment of salary from Belfast.¹⁵¹ The payment of teachers' salaries soon proved to be a heavy financial burden for the Dublin administration, and after Collins' death in August 1922, the Provisional government reconsidered its non-recognition tactics toward the North. In the end, Dublin decided to stop paying northern teachers' salaries from 31 October 1922. Teachers and managers who had been paid by Dublin then turned to Londonderry's Ministry, which agreed to grant them funding after they signed a declaration of allegiance to the King.¹⁵²

The Lynn committee carried on its work until June 1922, when it issued an interim report recommending the creation of three kinds of elementary schools: state schools, independent schools and an intermediate category. The latter envisaged school managers appointed by both local authorities and the affiliated church; these schools received less funding than state schools but more than independent schools. Regardless of what kind of school they worked for, all primary teachers had their salaries paid by the Ministry of Education. Finally, instead of religious instruction, the committee recommended "simple Bible instruction", a formula acceptable to all Protestant denominations, but in

¹⁴⁹ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/5 (Transfer of Educational Services to Northern Ireland. Circular to Managers of schools, local committees, teachers etc. from the Ministry of Education of Northern Ireland. 25 Jan. 1922).

¹⁵⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 178-9.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁵² D. H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity: the Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland, 1920-1950* (Belfast, 1973), p. 45.

contradiction to Roman Catholic insistence upon the centrality of catechism and clerical interpretation of Scripture for the laity.¹⁵³

The Bill that Londonderry presented to the Belfast parliament the following year was largely based on the interim report, and on the 1902 Education Act applying to England and Wales.¹⁵⁴ It created three classes of schools. Class I was composed of schools fully transferred to public authority by their managers. Class II schools were managed by committees with four representatives of the former managers of the school and two representatives of education authorities. The presence of the former managers was aimed at guaranteeing some form of continuity, and public funds covered half the expenses for heating, cleaning and maintenance.

The Londonderry Act created regional education committees, one or more for each county, elected by local bodies.¹⁵⁵ These committees instead of school committees were in charge of teachers' appointments in both transferred and provided schools.¹⁵⁶ Class III schools were voluntary schools, they could receive funds to cover half expenditure for heating and cleaning if the education authorities approved, but they received no grants for maintenance.¹⁵⁷ Londonderry rejected Bible instruction as recommended by the committee, despite the fact that the measure had large support in Parliament and within the Protestant community in general. It was, he believed, ultra vires to the Government of Ireland Act. He wanted unpaid religious instruction to be delivered outside school hours and only when the parents requested it in schools belonging to class I and II. With Craig's support, he managed to have this measure included in the final version of the Education Act.¹⁵⁸ It is likely that Craig agreed with Londonderry on the issue of religious instruction because he feared that

¹⁵³ N. C. Fleming, "Lord Londonderry and Education Reform in 1920s Northern Ireland", in *History Ireland*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), p. 38.

¹⁵⁴ S. Farren, "Unionist-Protestant reaction to Educational Reforms in Northern Ireland, 1923-1930", *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* (1985), Vol. 14, No. 3, p. 227.

¹⁵⁵ D. H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity: the Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland, 1920-1950* (Belfast, 1973), p. 59.

¹⁵⁶ S. Farren, "Unionist-Protestant reaction to Educational Reforms in Northern Ireland, 1923-1930", *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* (1985), Vol. 14, No. 3, p. 228.

¹⁵⁷ M. Harris, *The Catholic Church and the Foundation of the Northern Irish State* (Cork, 1993), p. 199.

¹⁵⁸ N. C. Fleming, "Lord Londonderry and Education Reform in 1920s Northern Ireland", *History Ireland*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), p. 38.

funding religious instruction would constitute a breach of section 5 of the Government of Ireland Act.¹⁵⁹

Unrecognised schools such as those of the Christian Brothers, who ran eight primary schools in Northern Ireland, did not receive any financial support from the state. Initially, they were happy to remain outside the national system because this allowed them to use their own texts without approval from the national board. However, their financial situation quickly deteriorated and in 1925, they applied for recognition to the Ministry of Education. After agreeing to use textbooks approved by the national board, the Brothers finally obtained recognition in 1927.¹⁶⁰

The Catholic community did not welcome the Bill which “whilst not openly promoting strong British or Protestant values (...) was viewed by those outside that cultural group as doing so obliquely”.¹⁶¹ For example, Catholics resented the fact that they could not build new schools with public money despite the fact that they paid taxes. They felt that their situation had worsened because in pre-partition Ireland the Board of Commissioners of National Education generally agreed to cover up to two thirds of the expenses of voluntary schools, and exceptions paid even more.¹⁶² Moreover, the Bishops feared that the abolition of Proportional Representation for local elections, approved in September 1922, would affect schools too, because Catholics were underrepresented in local boards and would therefore be overwhelmed in education committees. In the aftermath of the Londonderry reform, the majority of Catholic schools in Northern Ireland decided to remain independent.

Meanwhile, the Bishops started to urge Catholics to organise themselves and enter politics in order to defend their interests, particularly in regard to education.¹⁶³ On the other hand, the Protestant churches were left disappointed by the provisions for religious instruction, and feared that Catholics in local boards would have a say over their schools once they had been transferred. They felt Catholics were privileged because, even if they received less

¹⁵⁹ S. Farren, *The Politics of Irish Education, 1920-65* (Belfast, 1995), p. 63.

¹⁶⁰ M. Harris, *The Catholic Church and the Foundation of the Northern Irish State* (Cork, 1993), pp. 209-10.

¹⁶¹ N. C. Fleming, “Lord Londonderry and Education Reform in 1920s Northern Ireland”, *History Ireland*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), p. 38.

¹⁶² S. Farren, “Nationalist-Catholic reaction to educational reform in Northern Ireland, 1920–30”, *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* (1986), Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 23.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

public money, they were in full control of appointments and religious instruction.

Londonderry's Act did not fully satisfy any section of the community.

- **Teachers' training**

Another controversy between the Catholic Church and the northern government regarded the training of future teachers. Traditionally, the Catholic hierarchy opposed state-run teachers' training, and at the end of the nineteenth century obtained public funds for denominational colleges.¹⁶⁴ Since then, St Mary's College in Belfast provided teacher training for northern women, but there were no similar institutions for Catholic men in the North, who had to attend southern colleges. After partition, this became a problem.

In 1922, Stranmillis University College was established in Belfast to provide state-funded teacher training for men and women of all religions. However, the Church refused to allow Catholic men to train alongside Protestants. In 1923, the Education Act recognised St Mary's College and granted financial support, but it did not provide for the establishment of a training college for Catholic men, who were expected to attend Stranmillis. The Bishops suggested that northern Catholic teachers continue to attend southern institutions, but Londonderry rejected the proposal since the school curriculum was very different in the Free State. The situation escalated rapidly, and in March 1923 the northern Bishops issued a firm statement:

For us the formation of young Catholic teachers in colleges that are both Catholic and residential is a vital matter. The Catholics (...) made heavy sacrifices to provide a Catholic training college long before the government of the time was moved to admit the justice of their claim and make grants to several training colleges. Assuredly there should be an agreement now to use to the utmost the existing training colleges for the benefit of the whole country. (...) It is reported, however, that the only training that will be recognised in Northern Ireland is training at a University for which the candidates are not prepared by a course of secondary education, and where the surroundings, are not at all suited to form the teacher for his work (...). We cannot

¹⁶⁴ M. Harris, *The Catholic Church and the Foundation of the Northern Irish State* (Cork, 1993), p. 211.

think of employing teachers trained in this haphazard way.¹⁶⁵

Although the Bishops forbade Catholic schools to employ teachers trained at Stranmillis, the college received 172 applications from Catholics out of a total of 420 applicants.

Interestingly, 113 of the 172 Catholic applications came from women.¹⁶⁶ It seems that, despite the Bishops' ban, Catholics who aspired to become teachers were ready to attend state-run colleges. This caused concern among Protestants who feared that Catholic teachers might be employed in class I and II schools. In fact, according to the Education Act, committees could not select teachers based on their religion, and thus Catholics were indeed entitled to teach in schools fully or partially under state control.¹⁶⁷

In the following years, representatives of the Catholic Church and the Ministry of Education found it very difficult to negotiate a settlement of the teachers' training question. In 1924, a deputation appointed by Joseph MacRory, Bishop of Down and Connor, was received by the Ministry's assistant secretaries. MacRory, a staunch supporter of the non-recognition policy, had expressed anti-Protestant sentiments on more than one occasion, and believed in the moral supremacy of the Catholic Church.¹⁶⁸ The deputation he appointed asked for the establishment of a Catholic training college for men, since teachers trained in the Free State were not allowed to teach in Northern Ireland. They were answered that there were not enough Catholic men teachers to justify a separate college, but that Catholic men training at Stranmillis could reside in a separate hostel. The question of erection and maintenance costs of the hostel arose, with the Ministry's secretaries refusing to pay for its building and the deputation insisting that they were entitled to receive funds toward it just like any other denomination.

The deputation demanded, moreover, that the Catholic hostel be separated by a wall from other hostels. They accepted the association of Catholics and other students in organised

¹⁶⁵ *The Irish Independent*, 28 March 1923.

¹⁶⁶ Stormont Papers, Vol. 3, col. 356. 17 April 1923.

¹⁶⁷ N. C. Fleming, "Lord Londonderry and Education Reform in 1920s Northern Ireland", *History Ireland*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), p. 38.

¹⁶⁸ B. Lynn, "MacRory, Joseph", DIB.

games but they asked for separate ground for recreation.¹⁶⁹ The disagreement about the training institution remained, but the meeting was not entirely fruitless. The deputation accepted the general course of training in Stranmillis, apart from History, Psychology, Ethics and parts of English Literature. The Ministry's secretaries were ready to bridge these gaps, and added that a different History lecturer might not be necessary if "controversial periods were not selected for study".¹⁷⁰

The question of accommodation for Catholic students at Stranmillis caused a stalemate between the Church and the Ministry. At the following meeting, secretaries of the Ministry reported that Londonderry was ready to make a substantial contribution to the erection and maintenance of a hostel for Catholic students in the neighbourhood of Stranmillis. However, the Minister did not agree on the separating wall and other "unreasonable requirements", and the Church's representatives rejected the offer.¹⁷¹ Negotiations broke down and reopened the following year after Patrick O'Donnell had become Primate of Ireland following the death of Cardinal Logue in November 1924.

Unlike MacRory, O'Donnell was sceptical of the non-recognition policy in general, and was on friendly terms with Londonderry.¹⁷² Soon after his appointment, the Minister invited him to join an Education Advisory Council, stressing that he was anxious that this body gain respect and confidence from the whole population of Northern Ireland. It seems from the correspondence between the two that Londonderry sincerely hoped to involve O'Donnell and the Catholic Church in his work to reform the education system. However, the Bishop rejected the invitation. Londonderry then asked if he could suggest anybody who would be suited to represent Catholics' interests, but O'Donnell refused to co-operate with the government until the question of male teachers was settled.¹⁷³ Church and Ministry representatives repeatedly met in the first months of 1925, until they agreed that Catholic men could be trained in London at St Mary's College in Hammersmith, run by the Vincentian

¹⁶⁹ COFLA, ARCH/10/3/18 (O'Donnell papers, Training of teachers, Memorandum on the reception of a deputation appointed by Dr MacRory to consult the ministry in reference to the training of Catholic men teachers).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ COFLA, ARCH/10/3/18 (O'Donnell papers, Training of teachers, Memorandum on the reception of a deputation by the ministry in reference to the training of Catholic men teachers, 20 June 1924).

¹⁷² P. Maume, "O'Donnell, Patrick", DIB.

¹⁷³ COFLA, ARCH/10/3/19 (O'Donnell papers, Advisory Council on Education, 1924. Correspondence between Londonderry and O'Donnell, Nov. 1924).

Fathers. The Principal of St Mary's complained to O'Donnell that there was not enough space to accommodate the new Irish students, but the Bishop made it clear that his request was really an order.¹⁷⁴ After such difficult negotiations, O'Donnell was determined to make the settlement with the government work.

The agreement was not welcomed by some sections of the Protestant community since it appeared to favour Catholics. Robert Lynn complained about the cost of training teachers in London (£76 thirteen shillings per annum for each student), compared to each man training at Stranmills at a cost of £75 a year.¹⁷⁵ Despite Protestant discontent, the agreement between the Church and the Ministry was not questioned in the following years.

- **The 1925 Amendment Act**

As already mentioned, the Catholic community opposed the Londonderry Act mainly because it did not provide voluntary schools with adequate funding, but Protestant churches too did not welcome its provision for religious education. According to the Lynn Committee recommendations, religious education was to be guaranteed a central role in class I and II schools in the form of simple Bible teaching. Londonderry, however, opposed denominational education, and excluded religious instruction from the required curriculum as set out by the Act: teachers were not obliged to provide it, and it was delivered outside school hours only when the children's parents so demanded. In this case, religious authorities and not education committees would appoint teachers, who were not to be paid with public funds. Moreover, since teachers were not supposed to provide religious instruction, the Act assured that personal religious beliefs were not taken into account when teachers were appointed.¹⁷⁶

In general, teachers' unions welcomed the provision as it granted appointments based solely on professional merit.¹⁷⁷ But the fact that the State would allow religious instruction without taking responsibility for its provision, and religious authorities would not be in

¹⁷⁴ COFLA, ARCH/10/3/18 (O'Donnell papers, Training of teachers, Correspondence between O'Donnell and J. J. Doyle, Principal of St Mary's College, Mar. 1925).

¹⁷⁵ Stormont papers. Vol. 6, col. 173. 23 April 1926.

¹⁷⁶ S. Farren, *The Politics of Irish Education, 1920-65* (Belfast, 1995), pp. 60-6.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

control of teachers' appointment, served to decrease the influence of the various churches on primary education. The latter issue caused anxiety because regional committees in charge of teachers' appointment would be, in a few areas, predominantly Catholic.¹⁷⁸ Whereas the northern government could easily ignore protests from Catholics, it could not afford to dismiss its own supporters.

In early 1925, Protestant church leaders and prominent Orangemen meeting in the Assembly Hall of the Presbyterian Church in Belfast signed a petition asking the government to amend the Londonderry Act.¹⁷⁹ The United Education Committee (UEC), formed by representatives of Protestant churches and school managers, gained widespread support between 1923 and 1925 in their campaign for changing the Act.¹⁸⁰ Protestant churches discouraged managers from transferring their schools to state control, and insisted on their demands for religious instruction and control of teachers' appointment. Finally, in March 1925, the government agreed to amend the Act, likely because they feared that divisions within the unionist community might weaken their case before the Boundary Commission, whose work was reaching its final stages.

At this point, Craig replaced Londonderry at the negotiation table, his attitude being less intransigent and open to compromise. By mid-March, an amendment bill was approved by the parliament, removing the prohibition of religious instruction during school hours and allowing religious beliefs of teachers to be considered for their appointment.¹⁸¹ Their appointments were now not only in the hands of regional committees, since school committees had to be consulted.¹⁸²

However, the controversy was not completely settled. Despite the amendments, the Protestant churches were dissatisfied because there were no legal guarantees that religious instruction would be delivered in all public schools. Moreover, they wanted places reserved to their representatives in education committees.¹⁸³ Therefore, the UEC and the Ministry

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁷⁹ S. Farren, "Unionist-Protestant reaction to Educational Reforms in Northern Ireland, 1923-1930", *History of Education* (1985), Vol. 14, N. 3, p. 231.

¹⁸⁰ N. C. Fleming, "Lord Londonderry and Education Reform in 1920s Northern Ireland", *History Ireland*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2011), p. 39.

¹⁸¹ S. Farren, *The Politics of Irish Education, 1920-65* (Belfast, 1995), p. 75.

¹⁸² S. Farren, "Unionist-Protestant reaction to Educational Reforms in Northern Ireland, 1923-1930", in *History of Education* (1985), Vol. 14, N. 3, pp. 231-2.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 232.

continued to discuss the terms of transfer of schools. The UEC asked for religious instruction to be delivered by teaching staff on a programme to be approved by managers transferring the school, and that any appointed teacher who was found objectionable on religious grounds could be notified to the educational authority in order to terminate the contract.¹⁸⁴ Londonderry replied that section 5 of the Government of Ireland Act prevented education authorities from applying public monies to the teaching of any particular religious belief. In the end, they agreed on a compromise allowing teachers to deliver “simple Bible instruction”, which was supposed to exclude the teaching of any particular doctrine. Bible instruction was to be taught during school hours by regular teachers, when required by the relevant education authority.¹⁸⁵

The nationalist press interpreted the agreement on Bible instruction as the capitulation of the government, and claimed that the Protestant churches had finally “proclaimed themselves Denominationalists in principle and practice (...) We trust no one will be so hypocritical as to resurrect the old pretence that simple Bible instruction is not necessarily denominational”.¹⁸⁶ The *Irish News* boasted about the fact that Catholics had never changed their position: they wanted religious instruction to be delivered by Catholics in Catholic schools, whereas those who demanded change of the Londonderry Act were not honest enough to admit that they wanted denominational education.¹⁸⁷ Protestants argued that Bible instruction was undenominational since teachers were supposed to read passages without interpreting or explaining them. But, asked the *Irish News*, how could pupils benefit from that? It was likely that teachers would have no choice but to intervene and clarify what they read to the children, and they would do so from their own religious point of view.¹⁸⁸ Lord Londonderry, embittered by the changes to his reform and by the lack of support from his colleagues, resigned in 1926, and returned to Britain. Years later he wrote to Robert Lynn about Ulster: “I wanted the Province governed in quite a different way; but I was a voice crying in the wilderness”.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ PRONI, ED/32/B/1/2/17 (Religious Instruction, 1925 Education Bill. Correspondence between the UEC and the Ministry of Education, April-May 1925).

¹⁸⁵ S. Farren, *The Politics of Irish Education, 1920-65* (Belfast, 1995), p. 77.

¹⁸⁶ *The Irish News*, 10 June 1925.

¹⁸⁷ *The Irish News*, 11 June 1925.

¹⁸⁸ *The Irish News*, 26 June 1925.

¹⁸⁹ A. Jackson, “Stewart, Charles Stewart Henry Vane-Tempest”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

During a debate on the Education budget for 1926-27, Devlin praised Londonderry by stating that, although he disagreed with his method and secular ideas, “for broad-mindedness, for a desire to conciliate, for a promptitude and readiness to meet where possible in administrative adjustments the claims our people have made, no man could have displayed a finer or more impartial spirit”.¹⁹⁰

- **The new Minister of Education and the 1930 Education Act**

Lord Londonderry was replaced by Lord Charlemont, an ex-member of the Ulster Volunteers who granted increasing power to Protestant churches.¹⁹¹ Nevertheless, Charlemont held liberal views on education, and tried to be impartial and well-disposed towards Catholics, as the case of Kilrea (Londonderry) Convent School demonstrates. This voluntary school, attended by 79 children, 52 of compulsory school age, had been equipped and established without any cost to the public, and it provided a high standard education, as Charlemont admitted.¹⁹² Since it was a voluntary Catholic school, it is likely that the Church bore the costs. When the school applied for recognition in order to receive public grants, Mrs Chichester, one of the two women elected to the northern parliament in 1921, and a former member of the Lynn committee, took a personal interest in the application.¹⁹³ A staunch unionist, her involvement in Convent School was likely the result of her interest in education issues and of the fact that her family was the main landowner of Kilrea.

Mrs Chichester provided Charlemont with a detailed list of pupils and their addresses in order to dismiss the claims of those who opposed recognition of the Convent School that the pupils could be accommodated at St Columba’s Public Elementary School. Charlemont was persuaded that the pupils attending the Convent School lived too far from St Columba’s, and that the latter could not house more children without being enlarged. Finally, he agreed to grant provisional recognition for one year, and dismissed protests

¹⁹⁰ Stormont papers, Vol. 7, col. 1245. 13 May 1926.

¹⁹¹ W. Murphy, “Caulfeild, James Edward Geale”, DIB.

¹⁹² PRONI, ED/32/A/1/44 (Minister of Education, Reforms in the 1920s. Correspondence between Lord Charlemont and Mrs Chichester, November 1926 – January 1927).

¹⁹³ B. Hourican, “Parker, Dame Dehra”, DIB.

against the recognition of Kilrea Convent School as “entirely political and sectarian”.¹⁹⁴ In particular, when writing to Mrs Chichester, Charlemont instanced a man, Mr Kidd, who complained that recognition “would be a blow to Unionist workers like himself”.¹⁹⁵ However, Charlemont believed that Mr Kidd should be happy to know that Catholic children in a recognised school would receive an education broadening their views, whereas in a non-recognised school “the children can be brought up on histories extremely denominational and distinctly – what shall I call it? – nationalist in teaching”.¹⁹⁶

It is evident that Charlemont had his prejudices towards Catholic schools, but it seems that he did not insist on denominational education as an inviolable principle. He made clear what he believed his task to be in the last sentence of his letter to Mrs Chichester, by writing “I cannot say how strongly I object to the idea that a unionist government is brought in, not only to maintain the union, but also to humour the sectarian prejudices of all unionists”.¹⁹⁷ Mrs Chichester replied that, although she wished that a new era of religious tolerance would come soon, she admitted that this belief was not shared by many government supporters. On the other hand, Catholics would never give up control over the young, nor recognise that the government was impartial. Therefore, she concluded, the Unionist government should be careful not to alienate the loyal in the attempt to gain trust of the disloyal.¹⁹⁸

The disloyal Catholics, as Mrs Chichester called them, generally considered unfair the limited access of their schools to public funding, although their political representatives appreciated the Ministry’s efforts to address nationalists’ grievances. When discussing the Education budget in May 1927, Joe Devlin stated:

In the discharge of our public duties we have to make representations about schools from time to time. We do not always get what we want, but then no politician ever does. We have to be satisfied with the next best thing, but wherever these people can

¹⁹⁴ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/44 (Minister of Education, Reforms in the 1920s. Correspondence between Lord Charlemont and Mrs Chichester, November 1926 – January 1927).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/44 (Minister of Education, Reforms in the 1920s. Correspondence between Lord Charlemont and Mrs Chichester, November 1926 – January 1927).

reasonably concede what they conceive to be reasonable they do it, and Lord Charlemont's conduct in the administration of the Act has been characterized by courtesy, by kindness, and by goodwill, and he is, therefore, following in the footsteps of Lord Londonderry. I might say that the same can be said of the whole staff of the Education Office. (...) After all, one must be just to the officials of the Government, even though one would like to be unjust to the Government.¹⁹⁹

Devlin's speech is highly significant because it shows that relations between nationalist representatives and the Ministry of Education were far better than those between the former and the government. This may suggest that Devlin and the other nationalist MPs did not share the intransigence of the Catholic hierarchy, which increased after the death of Cardinal O'Donnell in 1927 and the designation of MacRory as Primate of Ireland. MacRory was soon invited by Charlemont to join a new Advisory Council on Education, but the Archbishop rejected the offer.²⁰⁰

In the meantime, the Protestant churches, not yet satisfied despite the 1925 amendment, decided it was time to claim further concessions from the government. After a meeting in July 1928, Charlemont informed Craig that he did not expect a new campaign against the 1923 Education Act to start soon.²⁰¹ He was soon disabused. The Protestant churches were determined to secure substantial changes to the Londonderry Bill, and the following year, there were dozens of meetings between their deputations and Ministry officials.²⁰² Unlike Londonderry, Charlemont seemed ready to accede to the requests of the Protestant churches. He proposed amendments to guarantee that no Catholic teachers could be appointed to Protestant schools, to assure obligatory Bible instruction in transferred and provided schools, and to ensure that the different churches had a representative in regional committees. Finally, he promised to make sure that all regional committees provided

¹⁹⁹ Stormont papers, Vol. 8, col. 1536-7. 18 May 1927.

²⁰⁰ M. Harris, *The Catholic Church and the Foundation of the Northern Irish State* (Cork, 1993), p. 233.

²⁰¹ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/58 (Proposals of the United Education Committee of Protestant Churches and Grand Orange Lodge on various matters in regard to educational administration. Letter from Charlemont to Craig, 10 July 1928).

²⁰² PRONI, ED/32/A/1/59 (Proposals of the United Education Committee of Protestant Churches and Grand Orange Lodge on various matters in regard to educational administration).

transport for Protestant children where there were no Protestant schools within reasonable distance.²⁰³

The latter statement likely referred to the situation of Aughlisnafin in county Down, which was under investigation by the Ministry at the time. In Aughlisnafin eleven Protestant children attending a Catholic school were compelled to learn Irish and to be present during religious instruction. Since the little Protestant community was in an overwhelmingly Catholic district, the eleven children lived very far from the nearest Protestant school. The Down Regional Committee rejected an application for the children's transport to the nearest public school, and thus the manager of the Catholic school got in touch with the Minister. He recommended that transport be provided, but stressed that further investigation into the matter would be counterproductive, as it would likely lead to a boycott of Protestants by Catholics.²⁰⁴ The Catholic manager recognised the justice of Protestants' claims and sought for help from the Minister in the attempt to maintain good relations between the two communities. It seems that the case of Aughlisnafin had considerable resonance in the Ministry since the new Education bill provided for children's transport.

In parallel with the Protestant churches' campaign for further changes to the Education Act, Catholic representatives intensified their demand to obtain public funding for voluntary schools, and tried to make their case in the Free State at the Centenary Celebrations of Catholic Emancipation in Dublin in 1929.²⁰⁵ However, the Church' campaign remained centred in Northern Ireland. As soon as the offer by Charlemont to the Protestant churches became public, the Bishops complained about the insufficient and unfair funding of their schools. They believed that as long as Catholic schools maintained the standard of efficiency demanded by the state they were entitled to receive public grants. Moreover, Catholics contributed their share to the revenue from which the grants were made, and therefore

²⁰³ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/59 (Proposals of the United Education Committee of Protestant Churches and Grand Orange Lodge on various matters in regard to educational administration. Note of interview with Charlemont by a deputation of the Grand Orange Lodge, 23 April 1929).

²⁰⁴ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/59 (Proposals of the United Education Committee of Protestant Churches and Grand Orange Lodge on various matters in regard to educational administration. Letter from Henry O' Connor to Lord Charlemont, 26 April 1929).

²⁰⁵ S. Farren, "Nationalist-Catholic reaction to educational reform in Northern Ireland, 1920–30", *History of Education* (1986), Vol. 15, N. 1, p. 24.

they were fully entitled to receive state contribution. They felt that Catholic schools could not be transferred to local authorities, which were in most cases predominantly Protestant, and asked for guarantees in this respect.²⁰⁶ For example, in county Down, there were 10,928 Catholic and 22,020 non-Catholic children on rolls. However, the proportion was not mirrored by the composition of the Regional Education Committee, composed by five Catholics and 32 Protestants.²⁰⁷

Representatives of the Church and the nationalist community finally met with Charlemont and his assistants on 1 April 1930, when the First Reading of the Bill commenced in parliament.²⁰⁸ The Catholic delegation was composed by the Bishop of Derry Bernard O’Kane, six clergymen, and twelve nationalist senators and MPs. Devlin expressed his disappointment at the failure of the Ministry to invite Catholics to the negotiation table while framing the reform bill. He stressed that the situation had fundamentally changed since 1923, when they had not been in a position to accept government’s invitations. Since the Bishops and the Catholic Clerical managers’ association had submitted their views, and made themselves available for a meeting, they expected the government to seek their co-operation. Charlemont addressed Devlin’s remarks by remarking that Catholics should have asked to meet with ministers explicitly, as Protestant delegations did. The Minister did not actively try to involve Catholics in the negotiations, although he did nothing to exclude them.

The Catholic delegation argued that the Ministry, despite officially supporting undenominational education, had accepted the principle of school management by individual clergymen de facto, since it paid teachers’ salaries, and half of the expenses for cleaning and heating. The refusal to provide funding for building was inconsistent with the recognition of clerical management. Catholics grievances were intensified by the fact that, with the 1925 amendment on Bible teaching, the transfer of Protestant schools had been made easier, whereas there had been no attempt to meet the Bishops’ demands. They insisted that simple Bible teaching was “a repudiation of the Catholic view of the Holy

²⁰⁶ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/80 (Statement of views of R. C. Bishops forwarded by Cardinal MacRory, Feb. 1930).

²⁰⁷ *The Hibernian Journal*, May 1929.

²⁰⁸ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/81 (Deputations, Education Amending Bill, 1930. Interview with a deputation representing Catholic interests, received by the Minister, parliamentary secretary and Bonaparte Wyse, 1 Apr. 1930).

Scriptures”, and no Catholic child could attend transferred schools.²⁰⁹ The Minister replied that the Bill under consideration did not take anything away from voluntary schools, but he also stressed that simple Bible teaching was not the only form of religious instruction allowed in transferred schools. Catechetical instruction was to be arranged with the teachers if required. He concluded by saying that Protestant and Catholic voluntary schools in Northern Ireland were in the same condition.

In the end, the new Education Act guaranteed that if ten or more parents so required, class I and II schools would be obliged to deliver Bible instruction. Moreover, schools were obliged to provide facilities and opportunities for distinctive religious teaching through the voluntary agency of the teachers or Protestant clergymen who were given the "right of entry" to the schools by the education authorities. Finally, in transferred schools, old managers, generally clerics, would have at least half of the places on the school committee, and the latter would have the power to forward names of potential teachers.²¹⁰ For the first time, Catholic Church authorities started to consider adopting the 'four-and-two' system of school management, in order to have 50% of capital expenses covered by public funding. In the end, the government decided to offer grants of 50% on capital expenditure to all voluntary schools, and thus the Church dropped consideration of the four-and two system option.²¹¹

Craig claimed that the new Bill was not a departure from the Londonderry Act, but it simply clarified “what was the intention of Parliament when the Act was passed in 1923. (...) we have no intention (...) to penalise any section of the community no matter what their religion maybe”.²¹² Catholics protested that the government was turning fully state-funded schools into Protestant institutions, and reiterated their objection to simple Bible teaching, which could not include any Catholic tenets distinctive from other Christian denominations. As Devlin stated during the reading of the Bill, they wanted “a guarantee of Catholic teaching in Catholic schools, and that is afforded us in the preservation of the present

²⁰⁹ PRONI, ED/32/A/1/81 (Deputations, Education Amending Bill, 1930. Interview with a deputation representing Catholic interests, received by the Minister, parliamentary secretary and Bonaparte Wyse, 1 Apr. 1930).

²¹⁰ S. Farren, *The Politics of Irish Education, 1920-65* (Belfast, 1995), pp. 94-5.

²¹¹ S. Farren, “Nationalist-Catholic reaction to educational reform in Northern Ireland, 1920–30”, *History of Education* (1986), Vol. 15, N. 1, pp. 26-7.

²¹² Stormont papers, Vol. 12, col. 724. 9 April 1930.

managerial system. That system has proved satisfactory to the Catholic minority and impinges in no way on the rights of anybody".²¹³ The frustration felt by Catholic representatives was reflected in a statement by John Nugent, National Secretary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians:

It is evident that Lord Craigavon, and the bigots of the Six Counties, finding that their first attempt to deprive the Catholics of their Civil rights, in the matter of Local Government, has had no unpleasant reaction for their friends and co-religionists in the Free State, and that the Catholics in the Six Counties are left to fight their battles unaided by the people in the Twenty-Six Counties, are satisfied that they can proceed still further in their policy of penalising and oppressing the Catholic minority.²¹⁴

This statement is very significant because it implicitly recognises the substantial failure of nationalist representatives in Stormont who, as a minority, could do very little to oppose the united Unionist bloc confronting them. It also implies that there was a bond between unionists and southern Protestants, and that the Free State could have taken advantage of that in retaliation for the unfair treatment of northern Catholics. According to Nugent, the Belfast government had a clear project aimed at depriving Catholics of their rights that was carried on with impunity, since the Free State had abandoned northern nationalists to their destiny. It seems that Nugent believed that the only way to redress the minority's grievances was through aid from the South, but since this was not coming, he foresaw a bleak future.

In conclusion, the refusal to participate in the education reform process was only partially due to the abstention policy and the boycott of the Northern Ireland state by nationalist and republican representatives. It was mainly the result of the Catholic Church's opposition to interference in the education sphere and its distrust of the Protestant government. The increasing need for grants for schools' maintenance, the end of the abstention policy and the lack of support from the Free State eventually forced Catholic representatives to seek a compromise with the government.

²¹³ Stormont papers, Vol. 12, col. 716. 9 April 1930.

²¹⁴ *The Hibernian Journal*, May 1930.

- **Conclusion**

Education and the security forces became two major sources of grievance for the Catholic community since the birth of Northern Ireland. Although violence decreased in the mid-twenties, there were periodical resurgences, and the attitude of the government did not change significantly. The fact that members of the USC were allowed to keep arms, and generally assured impunity, deepened the rift between Protestants and Catholics, and contributed to alienate the latter from the state. As Tallents stressed in his final report, since the Specials abused their own neighbours, the spiral of retaliation was destined to continue for generations: “memories of reprisals will remain for many years to come”.²¹⁵ Similarly, Catholics believed that the government, although officially opposing denominational education, was really funding Protestant institutions, while using section 5 of the Government of Ireland Act as an excuse to deny equal treatment to Catholic schools. Although this was not the intention of Londonderry, changes to the 1923 Education Act made state education denominational in accordance to the requests of the Protestant churches. In the end, the government defended Protestants’ interests at the expenses of Catholics.

However, the disadvantages suffered by Catholics in Northern Ireland were not simply the result of discriminatory measures implemented by the government. For example, failure to include Catholics in the security forces was due to several reasons. Local USC commanders played a key role in excluding Catholics from the Special force, while the government did nothing to discourage this practice. On the other hand, Republican intimidation against those who might join the USC and RUC played a significant part. It is also likely that, knowing that they would have been ostracised by their own communities, many Catholics preferred not to seek employment in the police, or indeed the civil service.

Whereas most authors agree that Catholics’ complaints about security forces were justified,²¹⁶ secondary sources often attribute partial or major responsibility of the lack of public funding for Catholic schools to the Church itself. Akenson asserted that “the refusal of

²¹⁵ TNA, CO906/27 (Stephen Tallents papers, Notes on Police).

²¹⁶ M. Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State* (London, 1976); P. Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances* (Dublin, 1979).

the Catholic religious authorities to exert their influence upon the Lynn Committee and subsequently upon the Londonderry Act was especially unfortunate because, despite the civil war which was raging in Northern Ireland, the unionist government was making a determined effort to govern in a non-sectarian manner, an attempt which was abandoned in the mid-1920s".²¹⁷ As pointed out in this chapter, the northern government did initially try to ensure Catholic participation to the education reform process, but this does not mean that it granted equal rights to the minority. While Londonderry was inviting Logue to the Lynn committee, Specials were abusing Catholics with impunity. In the light of what has been described in this chapter, Akenson's misjudgement of the government's intention is apparent.

Moreover, it is unlikely that, had Logue sent a representative to the Lynn Committee, the final report would have been radically different since Protestant churches' delegates were in a majority. However, through its refusal to co-operate with the government, in accordance with its traditional policy rejecting state interference in education, the Church missed the opportunity to take advantage of Londonderry's determination to be fair towards all denominations. Although what might have come out of that remains a matter for speculation, the Church's rejection of Londonderry's invitation did weaken the Catholic case.

In conclusion, the Catholic community in Northern Ireland was discriminated against by the unionist government, which did nothing or very little to include Catholics in the process of state-building. The non-recognition policy pursued by Catholic representatives in the early 1920s contributed to the political alienation of the minority, while at the same time allowing unionists to shape the state according to their needs without interference. Subsequently, when nationalists ended abstention, they found themselves incapable of fighting discrimination since they were a minority opposing a solid majority determined to maintain their monopoly of power. Initially, the boycott of the northern parliament deprived the Catholic population of the possibility to exercise their right to vote, whereas later it became apparent that parliamentary politics had little chances to redress their grievances. In this

²¹⁷ D. H. Akenson, *Education and Enmity* (New York, 1973), pp. 52-3.

context, alternative forms of political participation gained a primary role in the life of northern Catholics.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BELFAST BOYCOTT

- **The expulsion of Catholic workers in Belfast**

The Anglo-Irish War involving the South of Ireland provoked sectarian incidents in Belfast from June 1920. Violence escalated after the killing of an Ulsterman, Lt-colonel G. B. Smyth, who was shot dead by the IRA at the local County Club in Cork on 17 July.¹ As Divisional Police Commissioner for Munster, Smyth was a fierce opponent of republicanism. Around one month before his death, he addressed RIC men in Listowel (Kerry) saying: “The more you shoot the better I will like you, and I assure you no policeman will get into trouble for shooting any man”.² After Smyth’s death, the driver and the fireman of the train that was to carry his body home to Banbridge in county Down refused to work the engine.³ Eventually, Smyth’s remains were conveyed in a military motor ambulance accompanied by an armed escort.⁴

The killing and the difficulty of carrying Smyth’s body home for burial caused great resentment among the Protestant community in Ulster. On Wednesday 21 July, the day of Smyth’s funeral, the Belfast Protestant Association organised a meeting at the gate of one of the two main shipyard firms, Workman, Clark & Co. Different sources estimated the number of those attending at between two and five thousands, most of them being shipyard workers and ex-servicemen.⁵ The meeting was addressed by a representative of the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (UULA), an organisation created by trade unionists of the Harland and Wolff shipyard in 1914. The UULA was born to unite and give voice to loyalist shipyard workers at a time when many in Britain believed that only capitalists and employers in Belfast opposed the Home Rule Bill.⁶ Initially not very popular, the UULA became stronger in 1919 when, due to the economic crisis and consequent unemployment, large numbers of Protestant ex-servicemen could not return to work. The organisation took

¹ D. Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf* (Belfast, 1988), p. 45.

² M. Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State* (London, 1976), p. 28.

³ P. Buckland, *Ulster Unionism* (Dublin, 1973), p. 122.

⁴ *The Irish Independent*, 21 July 1920.

⁵ H. Patterson, *Class conflict and sectarianism* (Belfast, 1980), p. 115.

⁶ M. Goldring, *Belfast, from Loyalty to Rebellion* (London, 1991), p. 120.

advantage of the situation to foster sectarian divisions among workers, and accused Catholics of having occupied Protestants' jobs.⁷

Employment segregation had characterised Belfast industry since the nineteenth century, when the town saw an extraordinary expansion of the linen industry, of the shipyards and of their ancillary industries. The linen labour force increased from 16,000 to 50,000 between 1850 and 1870, while the main shipbuilding firm, Harland and Wolff, which employed 500 people in 1861, had 9,000 workers in 1900.⁸ Protestants monopolized skilled employment within the engineering sector, while Catholics (men and women) were overrepresented in the bottom jobs in the linen mills.⁹ Due to rapid industrial development, urban Protestant unskilled labourers started to compete with Catholics from rural areas for jobs, and the conflict ran along religious lines.¹⁰ The Protestant monopoly over better jobs was traditionally maintained through trade unions, transmission of apprenticeship and local hiring.¹¹ When many Belfast Protestants volunteered in war service they left the town's economy short of skilled labour as wartime demand, both textile and shipbuilding, increased. This created opportunities for Catholics in sectors that had been hitherto closed to them. After the end of the war, the local economy could not reabsorb all the demobilized soldiers and most of them remained unemployed, while Catholics were employed in traditionally Protestant jobs.¹²

At the meeting outside Workman, Clark & Co gate on 21 July, agitators lamented that disloyal Sinn Féiners should not have been allowed to work at a time when "plenty of Protestant ex-soldiers are unemployed".¹³ The UULA representative threw coals to the fire by accusing Catholics from the South of Ireland of having stolen Protestants' jobs during the war.¹⁴ According to unionist propaganda, this was part of a strategy of "peaceful penetration" of Ulster, designed by Sinn Féin: Catholics from the South of Ireland were

⁷ P. Bew, H. Gibbon and H. Patterson, *The State in Northern Ireland, 1921-1972* (Manchester, 1979), p. 48.

⁸ I. Budge and C. O'Leary, *Belfast: approach to crisis* (London, 1973), pp. 73-4.

⁹ A. C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart* (Belfast, 1996), pp. 67-74-76.

¹⁰ M. Goldring, *Belfast, from Loyalty to Rebellion* (London, 1991), p. 65.

¹¹ N. Ó. Murchú, 'Split Labor Markets and Ethnic Violence after World War I: A Comparison of Belfast, Chicago, and Johannesburg', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 39, no. 4 (July 2007), p. 382.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹³ *The Irish News*, 22 July 1920.

¹⁴ P. Bew, P. Gibbon and H. Patterson, *The State in Northern Ireland, 1921-1972* (Manchester, 1979), p. 48.

coming to Belfast and settling there in order to eventually outnumber and overrule Protestants, thus dragging them into an Irish republic.¹⁵

At the end of the meeting, a group of men armed with sledge-hammers and other weapons smashed down the Harland and Wolff shipyard's gates, caught all those at work and tore open their shirts to see if they were wearing Catholic emblems. Those who did were beaten and sometimes thrown into the dock.¹⁶ Not only Catholic workers were expelled, but also some Protestants known for their radical or labour views. In fact, unionists tended to identify republicanism and socialism because British trade unions had repeatedly expressed support for the Irish national struggle.¹⁷ As a result, Protestants such as James Baird, Labour councillor, and John Hanna, ex-master of an Orange Lodge who had worked with James Larkin, founder of the Irish Labour Party, were expelled together with Catholics.¹⁸

In Belfast, because of the general segregation in employment, sectarian clashes had often set different sections of the working class against each other. For example, since the mid-nineteenth century, there had been sharp antagonism between ship's carpenters (mostly Protestants) and navvies (mostly Catholics). Expulsions of workers from the shipyards had already happened in 1886 and 1912, as the first and third Home Rule bills were introduced in the British parliament.¹⁹ On 3 June 1886, the day after the first Home Rule Bill had been defeated at its second reading, Catholic dock workers expelled a few Protestant fellow-workers, thus provoking the reaction of the Protestant shipwrights.²⁰ Dockers got the worse of it and one of them drowned in the river Lagan while trying to escape. Attacks against Protestant workers crossing Catholic districts followed in retaliation, and the usual cycle of sectarian violence began, characterised by street fighting, burning of houses, and clashes with the police. Sporadic attacks continued until October and caused the death of thirty-two people.

Years later, in April 1912, the British Prime Minister Henry Asquith introduced the third Home Rule Bill in Parliament. At the end of June, a group of Belfast Presbyterian children on

¹⁵ H. Patterson, *Class conflict and Sectarianism* (Belfast, 1980), p. 115.

¹⁶ J. D. Clarkson, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland* (New York, 1925), p. 366.

¹⁷ P. Bew, P. Gibbon and H. Patterson, *The State in Northern Ireland, 1921-1972* (Manchester, 1979), p. 48.

¹⁸ M. Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State* (London, 1976), p. 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

²⁰ B. A. Follis, *A State under Siege* (Oxford, 1995), p. 88.

excursion to Castledawson (Derry) met some Hibernians returning from a demonstration in Maghera. Disorders broke out and the children ran into the countryside while local Protestants arrived to engage in the confrontation. When news of the events reached Belfast, some of the children's fathers who worked in the shipyards attacked their fellow Catholic workers. As a result, around 2,000 people lost their jobs, and disorders continued until September.²¹

In July 1920, the expulsion of Catholic workers was followed by attacks against evening tramcars carrying Protestant workers and passing through Catholic areas in Belfast. Sectarian riots broke out in the town, where in the following days Catholics were expelled from the four major engineering firms and from the main building firm. In three days, eighteen people were killed and over 200 arrested. Violence erupted in other predominantly Protestant towns of North-East Ulster, such as Lisburn, Ballymena, Bangor, Banbridge, and Dromore, where Catholic houses and shops were attacked between 22 and 24 July.²² In the same areas, Catholics were driven out of linen mills and local factories. According to the British Trade Union Congress, 5,000 workers were expelled by the end of the week.²³

In early August, members of the Catholic clergy and of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul formed a committee to make appeal on behalf of the expelled workers, and organised a campaign to denounce the expulsions and the violence against Catholics in North-East Ulster. They circulated leaflets and postcards presenting the attacks as the last outburst of endemic sectarianism, and warned about future degeneration if partition was implemented. They appealed to Catholics in the rest of Ireland, in Britain, France and the U.S.²⁴

Estimates of the total number of workers driven from their employment by the end of 1920 varies between 7,000 and 10,000 according to the sources. The Irish correspondent of the British paper *The New Witness* wrote in September 1920 that "upwards of 7,000 workers are at this moment walking the streets of Belfast".²⁵ According to the committee in charge of the Belfast Expelled Workers' Fund, by the end of 1920, 9,631 workers had registered for

²¹ R. Rees, *Ireland 1905-25, Text and Historiography v. 1* (Newtownards, 1998), p. 159.

²² P. Buckland, *Ulster Unionism* (Dublin, 1973), p. 122.

²³ *Report of the British TUC*, 1921, p. 114.

²⁴ COFLA, ARCH/11/5/14 (MacRory papers, Belfast Expelled Workers' Fund. Propaganda material).

²⁵ *The New Witness*, September 1920.

relief.²⁶ In June 1922, the *Weekly Irish Bulletin* reported that 8,586 Catholics had lost their jobs due to the expulsions.²⁷ Among the shipyard expelled workers, there were around 300 Catholic young men who could not complete their apprenticeship, thus reinforcing the Protestant monopoly of skilled employment.²⁸

The vast majority of the expelled workers remained unemployed for the following years because of the post-war recession that was particularly hard in Belfast and the North of Ireland, often precluding any hope that employers would hire new workers.²⁹ After 1918 in fact, the linen industry was immediately affected by the end of military demand and difficulties in the supply of flax from Russia, which was under embargo. This also gradually affected engineering firms supplying the textile factories' machinery.³⁰ While around two thousand people were left unemployed, most of the workers were put on short-time employment. It is significant that, despite the expulsion of around 5,000 shipyard workers, only 500 loyalists, of whom many were ex-servicemen, found employment in the shipyards, according to the UULA.³¹

- **Reactions to the expulsions**

News of the Catholic workers' expulsions spread rapidly across Ireland and Britain. On 22 July 1920, the *Freeman's Journal* devoted several pages to the event, which was presented as an episode of sectarian violence by the title "Belfast bigotry again reaps its fatal harvest". The first comment about the situation was that "Belfast has lived up to its reputation for intolerance and persecution of the minority in its midst".³² An account of sectarian violence in the town since 1864 followed, emphasising the continuity in the practice of forcing Catholics out of work. The paper stressed that in July 1920, Orangemen specifically looked for Sinn Féiners, but they eventually attacked all Catholic workers since in

²⁶ COFLA, ARCH/11/5/14 (MacRory papers, Belfast Expelled Workers' Fund. Postcard appealing to Catholics overseas).

²⁷ Ibid., *Weekly Irish Bulletin*, Dáil Éireann Publicity Report, 12 June 1922.

²⁸ TNA, CO906/25 (Minute of meeting between Churchill, Fisher, Smith and deputation of Burke, Dougal and Hughes).

²⁹ M. Farrell, *Northern Ireland: the Orange State* (London, 1976), p. 29.

³⁰ H. Patterson, *Class conflict and Sectarianism* (Belfast, 1980), p. 119.

³¹ *The Belfast Newsletter*, 3 August 1920.

³² *The Freeman's Journal*, 22 July 1920.

their eyes they were all republican, as confirmed by an episode described on 26 July. Eyewitnesses reported that the assaulters asked a Catholic shipyard worker if he was a Sinn Féiner, which he denied since he was a firm supporter of the Parliamentary Party. Then the men asked him to curse the Pope and at his refusal, they threw him into the water.³³

Not all newspapers initially presented events as the result of sectarian hostility between Protestants and Catholics, and rather focused on the political character of the attack waged against republicans. On 22 July, the *Irish Independent* stated that “in 1912 Catholics, as such, were the victims. On this occasion Sinn Féiners are the objects of the attack”. The paper reported that groups of men searched the shipyards looking for Sinn Féiners, and at the news of what was taking place there, disorders later spread throughout Belfast. On 24 July, *The Anglo-Celt*, based in Cavan, reported the expulsion under the title “Outbreak in Belfast”. The paper wrote that all those suspected of being Sinn Féiners had been driven out of the shipyards, and subsequently disorders had spread throughout the town, resulting in the death of three people, all Catholic.

However, after a few days, nationalist newspapers abandoned the distinction between Sinn Féiners and Catholics and started to report events from a communal perspective. Moreover, they claimed that disorders in Belfast were part of a strategy of vendetta waged against Catholic workers and the Catholic population.³⁴ Therefore, they tended to dismiss the version of events supplied by the unionist press and by the British Chief Secretary in Ireland, Sir Hamar Greenwood, attributing the outbreak of violence in Belfast to the murder of Colonel Smyth in Cork. The *Freeman's Journal* commented: “The Chief Secretary would have been as near to the truth had he said that it originated as a consequence of the decease of Queen Anne”.³⁵ As Irish newspapers noted and reported, even in Britain many questioned Greenwood's version of events. The Belfast correspondent of the *Westminster Gazette* wrote:

it is common knowledge in Belfast, and has been frequently admitted by individual Unionists, that plans were matured at least two months ago to drive all the Home Rule workers in the shipyard out of their employment. The police were well aware of the scheme, and the question

³³ *The Freeman's Journal*, 26 July 1920.

³⁴ *The Irish Independent*, 23 July 1920; *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 24 July 1920.

³⁵ *The Freeman's Journal*, 26 July 1920.

discussed by them was not would the attack come but when it would do so. Obviously as Colonel Smyth was murdered only last week his death could not have been the cause of outrages planned months ago.³⁶

Belfast Catholics too were expecting an attack since they knew Orangemen had discussed it at secret meetings, as a shipyard worker confirmed to the *Independent*.³⁷ In the same article, it was stated that the attack was clearly planned and orchestrated by a central authority, which was hinted, but not openly stated, to be the Orange Order. According to the *Freeman's Journal*, violence was planned and systematic: Orange bands appeared not only in fighting areas but also in districts that had never been affected before. Their end was to drive all Catholics out of the town, and their method, according to the *Journal*, was that of "papering" as it was called when invented by Orangemen to clear Armagh and Down from Catholics in the late eighteenth century.³⁸

News about expulsions filled the newspapers for weeks, reporting testimonies and speculations. On 24 July, the *Freeman's Journal* reported the account of a Catholic who said that 300 men visited the foundry where he worked. They beat a few Catholics who had come to work, while some others were advised by friendly Orangemen to hide in the offices for safety. Orange gangs were reported bursting in looking for Catholic workers throughout the whole town, and those who had been expelled were reluctant to return to their workplaces for fear of being chased away.³⁹ The *Irish Independent* bitterly commented: "the now familiar pastime of hounding Nationalists out of their means of livelihood was again successfully indulged in".⁴⁰

Towards the end of the month, news appeared in the nationalist press about Orange employees who, evidently in accord with their employers, were passing resolutions asking expelled Catholic workers to sign a declaration against Sinn Féin as a precondition to their

³⁶ *The Westminster Gazette*, 24 July 1920.

³⁷ *The Irish Independent*, 26 July 1920.

³⁸ *The Freeman's Journal*, 26 July 1920. The term "papering" was used by magistrate Robert Lowry in 1797 to describe the practice of noticing Catholics to leave their houses before they were attacked in counties Armagh and Tyrone. W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1892), Vol. IV, p. 96.

³⁹ *The Freeman's Journal*, 24 July 1920.

⁴⁰ *The Irish Independent*, 26 July 1920.

reinstatement.⁴¹ For example, the *Freeman's Journal* reported a meeting of representatives of Protestant workers in the Orange Hall in Banbridge. They passed a resolution saying that well-known Sinn Féiners were to be excluded from works where Protestants were employed, and the remaining Catholic workers had to sign a declaration that they did not support or sympathise with Sinn Féin.⁴² Most of the workers attending the meeting actually wished for all the Catholics to be driven out of employment, but this was considered too drastic. Other meetings of unionist workers in the shipyards approved similar resolutions, and wished for loyal ex-servicemen and unionists to be considered for future applications for employment.

Reports of the expulsions and riots in Belfast had a significant impact upon the nationalist community across Ireland. Several elements in the accounts provided by the nationalist press contributed to raise concern over the fate of northern Catholics in case of partition. Episodes like that of the man thrown into the water for having refused to curse the Pope undoubtedly raised indignation, but the inconsistency between the alleged political motivations of the attacks and the reality of indiscriminate violence against all Catholics fuelled speculations about a war waged by unionists against northern nationalists. Accounts of armed men searching workplaces looking for Catholics, and the imposition of political tests agreed between Protestant workers and employers, seemed to confirm that expulsions and riots were part of a plan.

Reports setting events into a tradition of sectarian violence in Belfast suggested that northern Catholics could expect no better treatment from unionists. According to the nationalist press in fact, only a few trade unions expressed solidarity towards the expelled workers: the Amalgamated and General Union Society of Carpenters, Cabinetmakers and Joiners of Belfast, whose majority of members were Protestant, condemned the expulsion of Catholic workers.⁴³ On Saturday 24, the Belfast District Committee of the Shipbuilding and Engineering Trades' Federation resolved to send a deputation to the management of the two Belfast shipyards asking for the reinstatement of the expelled workers.⁴⁴ However, the lack of solidarity by the majority of Protestant workers prevented any strong action

⁴¹ *The Donegal News and Derry People*, 31 July 1920.

⁴² *The Freeman's Journal*, 29 July 1920.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26 July 1920.

⁴⁴ *The Irish Independent*, 26 July 1920.

aimed at the reinstatement of Catholics. Moreover, local authorities were generally unsympathetic: for example, when a deputation of expelled shipyard workers, including two Protestants and one non-Catholic, asked for permission to hold a meeting in St Mary's Hall, Belfast, this was refused.⁴⁵

Nationalist papers not only lamented the absence of unionist leaders' appeals for the reinstatement of Catholic workers, but also the lack of interest from the British government. After the 1918 general elections, due to the abstention of 73 Sinn Féin MPs, only six representatives of the Irish Parliamentary Party were left to defend the nationalist cause in Westminster, under the leadership of Joe Devlin.⁴⁶ As a passionate defender of workers' rights, Devlin had the support of Catholics and Protestants alike in his personal stronghold of West Belfast, and took a keen interest in the expulsions of summer 1920. He tried in vain to draw attention to the question in the Commons, pointing to the fact that most of the expelled workers were supporters of constitutional nationalism and not Sinn Féiners.⁴⁷ However, roars of protest were raised as he started to speak about the situation in Belfast.⁴⁸ Not only Irish nationalists but also British Labour MPs interrogated the government about the expulsions, although they did not obtain better results. When John Swan, MP for Barnard Castle, asked if workers' rights were to be determined by their religion, Greenwood replied that, although he regretted the situation, "labour difficulty in Belfast is due to a cleavage of opinion among the workmen themselves".⁴⁹

In mid-August, the House of Commons discussed the controversial Restoration of Order in Ireland Act, increasing military powers to the point that it authorised reprisals against the IRA. The act, which stayed in force until spring 1921, proved counterproductive as it started a spiral of retaliation characterised by murders, mass arrests and searches.⁵⁰ Devlin strenuously attempted to stop the passing of the Act, and was suspended after he lost his temper and claimed he despised the House of Commons that was the enemy of the liberties

⁴⁵ *The Freeman's Journal*, 29 July 1920.

⁴⁶ J. Loughlin, 'Devlin, Joseph', DIB.

⁴⁷ *The Irish News*, 27 July 1920.

⁴⁸ *The Freeman's Journal*, 27 July 1920.

⁴⁹ *Hansard*, 5th series, 11 Aug. 1920, Vol. 133, 417.

⁵⁰ D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 233; M. Walsh, *Bitter Freedom* (London, 2015), p. 240.

of both Ireland and England.⁵¹ He and his nationalist colleagues withdrew from Westminster.⁵²

- **The initial implementation of the boycott**

The inability or unwillingness, as claimed by the nationalist press, of the British government to stop the violence in Belfast, and the helplessness of the few nationalist representatives in Westminster, stimulated a spontaneous response to the northern riots by some southern republicans.

The first episodes of what became known as the Belfast boycott happened at the end of July 1920 in counties Louth and Monaghan. They were the result of autonomous initiatives by local republicans in retaliation for the expulsion of Catholic workers and the imposition of political tests in the North. For example, in Dundalk (Louth), traders were called upon to give an undertaking not to purchase from wholesale agents or manufacturing firms in Belfast and northern towns until the expelled Catholic workers were reinstated.⁵³ In Carrickmacross (Monaghan), young men entered a hotel where some Belfast commercial travellers were staying and left a notice that until sectarian disorders were over in Belfast they were not welcome there. Only a few commercial travellers got orders from Catholic merchants, and some of them were asked for their accounts and paid off.⁵⁴ A few days later, Louth County Council voted for a boycott of Ulster wholesale agents and manufacturers until Belfast Catholic workers were reinstated, while in Monaghan many commercial travellers were refused orders.⁵⁵ Tyrone County Council and Loughrea (Galway) Sinn Féin club passed resolutions asking traders in the whole country to cease “dealing with merchants who were believed to be in any way identified with or sympathetically disposed towards the campaign [against northern Catholics] until they gave convincing proof of the contrary”.⁵⁶

⁵¹ *The Anglo-Celt*, 14 August 1920.

⁵² E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 92.

⁵³ *The Anglo-Celt*, 31 July 1920.

⁵⁴ *The Freeman's Journal*, 31 July 1920.

⁵⁵ *The Anglo-Celt*, 7 August 1920.

⁵⁶ *The Freeman's Journal*, 6 August 1920.

The boycott had been a device characterising socio-economic struggle in Ireland since the Land War. In September 1880 Charles Stewart Parnell, President of the Land League, addressed a large meeting in Ennis (Clare), where the audience proposed to shoot “land-grabbers” who took farms from tenants evicted for non-payment of rent. Parnell replied by proposing another way of dealing with such a person. He stated: “You must shun him on the roadside...in the streets...in the shop...in the fair green and market place and even in the place of worship. By leaving him severely alone...by isolating him...as if he was a leper of old, you must show him your detestation of the crime he has committed”.⁵⁷ The strategy was soon adopted in county Mayo against the man whose name came to define the new kind of protest carried out by the Land League. Charles Cunningham Boycott was farming 1500 acres near Ballinrobe as land agent for Lord Erne. After two bad potato harvests in 1879 and ’80, he refused rent reductions, and three of his thirty-eight tenants received ejectment notices. Local land leaguers responded by intimidating Boycott’s servants out of service; then shopkeepers stopped supplying his household, and his crops were carried away.⁵⁸ Boycott and his family finally left Ireland for the US, after their case had become famous all over the world, while the verb “to boycott” appeared in dictionaries within twenty years.⁵⁹

After the end of the Land War, the boycott remained a device often used in Ireland, owing to its adaptability to different situations and goals, to the relative ease with which it was implemented, and to the fact that it was a lawful means of struggle. In 1904 in Limerick, the small Jewish community was attacked and their businesses boycotted for about two years, at the instigation of a local Redemptorist priest. Despite the support of the Protestant community, five families left the town as a direct consequence of the boycott.⁶⁰

During the Anglo-Irish War, the boycott was applied repeatedly. When in mid-February 1920, the Government of Ireland Act, envisaging the creation of a six-county Northern Ireland, started to be discussed in the British House of Commons, a few republican administrations in rural Ireland asked local traders to close their accounts with north-east Ulster firms that had not declared themselves against partition.⁶¹ This initiative was not

⁵⁷ R. Boycott, *Batty, Bloomers and Boycott. A little etymology of eponymous words* (London, 1982), p. 25.

⁵⁸ C. A. Boycott, *Boycott. The life behind the word* (Carbonel Press, Ludlow, 1997), ch. 17-18.

⁵⁹ L. Ó Raghallaigh, ‘CAPTAIN BOYCOTT: man and myth’, *History Ireland*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2011), p. 31.

⁶⁰ D. Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth Century Ireland* (Cork, 1998), p. 51.

⁶¹ *The Irish Times*, 4 February 1920.

officially supported by the Sinn Féin leadership, which likely feared it might foster divisions and increase the perception of Ulster as a separate entity, thus proving counter-productive in their struggle against partition.

Since the start of the Anglo-Irish War, there was a general boycott of the RIC and of all those who co-operated with them. For example, Donegal traders were warned not to supply the RIC with goods, and those few that ignored the warning were severely dealt with: “a man in Mountcharles who was on friendly terms with the police had hay burned”, while a publican who supplied policemen with drinks was rigidly boycotted.⁶² In some cases, the boycott was so strict that the victim publicly apologised to the local congregation at Sunday Mass. After that, or following the signing of an undertaking to stop dealing with the RIC, the boycott was normally lifted.⁶³

On the same day when the first news about the boycott of Belfast goods appeared on the *Anglo-Celt* and the *Freeman's Journal*, the *Derry People* published an article condemning reprisal as an ugly form of warfare. However, it went on to argue that, in the case of Belfast, reprisal was justified because unionists aimed at exterminating Catholics through emigration, and at neutralising their voting power. The article quoted the motto of Belfast, *pro tanto quid retribuamus* - for what we receive we pay back -, and encouraged Catholics to act accordingly by boycotting Belfast goods and Orange businesses. It appealed to Catholics in Donegal, Derry and Tyrone to stop sending their money to Orangemen: “The Lash people have the economic power to stop this venomous bigotry. Use it wisely. Don't support them. Support your own creed. They began it and they can abide by the consequences”.⁶⁴

The first responses to the expulsions of Catholic workers in Belfast and neighbouring towns were organised in counties bordering with what was to become Northern Ireland. This might suggest that the population of Monaghan, Louth and Donegal felt more sympathy towards Belfast Catholics than the rest of the country. However, the proximity of these counties to Belfast likely meant a high presence of northern goods as well as of representatives of unionist firms, which were the main targets of the early boycott initiative. This is confirmed by the fact that when the boycott was officially enforced in some areas

⁶² *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 7 August 1920.

⁶³ BMH, statements by Dan McCarthy, p.7; Patrick Hogan, p. 3.

⁶⁴ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 31 July 1920.

such as Meath and Westmeath local shops did not sell Belfast goods, thus they could not really implement the campaign. On the other hand, north-east firms were the main supplier not only of Ulster but also of Leitrim and Sligo, where the boycott immediately proved successful.⁶⁵

A few days after the first spontaneous actions in Louth and Monaghan, a group of Belfast Sinn Féin sympathisers decided to take the lead and organise an economic boycott to force the reinstatement of expelled workers. Reverend Dr MacRory (Bishop of Down and Connor), Sean MacEntee (Belfast born Sinn Féin TD for Monaghan South), Denis McCullough (Belfast born businessman), Frank Crummey (Intelligence Officer of the 3rd IRA Northern Division), and Rev. John Hassan (a Catholic priest in the parish of St Mary, Belfast) formed the Belfast Boycott Committee. Their goal was not only the reinstatement of expelled workers and the end of violence; they also saw the boycott as a powerful weapon in the struggle against partition.⁶⁶ Bishop MacRory believed that the expulsions had exposed the true face of unionism, and that they would convince the British government of the intolerable conditions to which partition would subject Catholics in the Six Counties.⁶⁷ However, it was precisely because of the partition threat that the Dáil initially refused to sanction the Belfast boycott.

The boycott proposal was first discussed at a Cabinet meeting in Dublin on 30 July. All the Ministers were in favour of its imposition except for Ernest Blythe, North Monaghan TD and Minister for Trade and Commerce, who believed it to be “a most ridiculous and short-sighted proposal”, and opposed it vehemently.⁶⁸ The cabinet finally decided to refer the question to the next Dáil meeting, and to ask Sean MacEntee to make a statement.⁶⁹ On 6 August 1920, he presented a memorial signed by representatives of Belfast republicans denouncing “the war of extermination” conducted against them, and lamenting the expulsion of more than 5,000 workers.⁷⁰ The memorial explained that those responsible for the expulsions had openly stated that that they were not fighting “Popery as such”, but

⁶⁵ BMH, statements by Thomas Kiernan, p. 9; Edward Seery, p. 8; Margaret Brady, p. 3; Harold McBrien, p. 6.

⁶⁶ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 91.

⁶⁷ COFLA, ARCH/11/5/14 (MacRory papers, Belfast Expelled Workers’ Fund. Letter from MacRory to the treasurers of the Belfast Expelled Workers’ Fund. 12 Aug. 1920).

⁶⁸ Statement by Ernest Blythe, BMH, p. 119-20.

⁶⁹ NAI, DE/1/2 (Minutes of Dáil Éireann Ministry and Cabinet, 26 Sept. 1919–15 Sept. 1920).

⁷⁰ *Dáil Éireann Debates*, 6 August 1920, Vol. F, No. 16. Belfast.

wanted to drive Sinn Féiners out of Ulster.⁷¹ Therefore, MacEntee argued that a commercial boycott would not be a sectarian response on their part, also because Protestants in the rest of Ireland were “not be molested in any way on account of the actions of their co-religionists in Belfast”.⁷²

The boycott was meant to prove that Belfast was part of Ireland, and since it had already begun in some areas as a result of spontaneous actions, it was urgent that the Dublin government take control and organise it at national level. Significantly, in his speech, MacEntee denied the exclusively sectarian nature of the riots and expulsions in Belfast by pointing out that northern Catholics were persecuted because of their allegiance to the Irish Republic. He described the violence against Catholics as “the first open act of Rebellion against the Republic”.⁷³ The belief that the boycott would prove to northern unionists their economic dependence from the south of Ireland was to become one of the main arguments of supporters of the campaign.

During the Daíl debate, whereas Nationalist and Labour MPs in Westminster stressed the sectarian connotation of the expulsion hoping that religious discrimination would persuade the government to act, MacEntee emphasised precisely the opposite in the Dáil. Initially, he received little support since most TDs openly disagreed with his interpretation of the events, and expressed doubts about the opportunity of implementing a commercial boycott of the North-East at a time when partition was becoming more and more likely. Countess Markiewicz, TD for Dublin St. Patrick, feared that a commercial blockade could play the enemy’s game by reinforcing the idea of a separation between Ulster and the rest of Ireland. Blythe stated that Belfast could not be coerced by a banks’ boycott, and that as Government of the Irish Republic they could not afford to alienate any section of the population. He also added that “the basis of every trouble in the North was sectarian”.⁷⁴ Michael Collins accused northern TDs of trying to inflame passions about an Ulster question that in his opinion did not exist. Finally, Arthur Griffith, acting president of the Dáil, despite opposing the boycott, urged the Government to take steps to prevent the imposition of religious and political tests as a condition of employment, and proposed an amendment

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

making all tests illegal. The amendment was carried, while MacEntee's motion was defeated.

The debate did not centre on the possible effectiveness of the boycott in assuring the reinstatement of Catholic workers and stopping the riots, but on its impact on the question of partition. The latter problem seems to have been ignored by the first republicans who encouraged the implementation of the boycott, as well as by the press. This is likely due to the fact that they responded spontaneously to the violence in Belfast. Those who took the organisation of the boycott into their hands were aware of the delicacy of the situation, as MacEntee's concern with Protestants in the rest of Ireland proves. However, the Belfast Committee felt an urgency to respond to the expulsions and riots without stopping to consider the consequences of the boycott on partition and inter-community relations. By rejecting the boycott initiative and condemning religious and political tests on workers, the Sinn Féin leadership were careful not to adopt a sectarian attitude that would have reinforced the idea of separation between Ulster and the rest of Ireland. As mentioned, this was already their main concern in February 1920.

The Dáil did not take any action to stop the boycott at local level. Moreover, on 11 August, the Cabinet approved the withdrawal of deposits from the three main northern banks, and a boycott of insurance companies whose headquarters were in Belfast.⁷⁵ They remained cautious and did not fully meet the demands of the Belfast Committee, since they did not sanction a boycott of all northern goods. At the same time though, they showed that their concern with partition did not come entirely from their emotional reaction to the expulsions. Above all, the inconsistency in the attitude of the republican leadership towards the boycott initiatives reflected the lack of a clear policy towards the northern question.

MacEntee and the members of the Belfast Committee were disappointed with the ambivalence of the Dáil government, but the lack of support from Dublin did not stop them, and they continued to organise the boycott. They intended to form a local committee with the sanction of the Dáil that would then be recognised as "the only duly authorised authority" in charge of the boycott.⁷⁶ The Ministry should define the terms of reference of

⁷⁵ NAI, DE/1/2 (Minutes of Dáil Éireann Ministry and Cabinet, 26 Sept. 1919–15 Sept. 1920).

⁷⁶ NAI, DE/2/110 (Belfast Boycott. Minutes of meeting, 19 August 1920).

the committee, but they strongly advised its constitution and personnel be kept secret. Their concern with secrecy soon proved justified but too late, since some important members of the Committee were imprisoned for their republican activities, while others escaped arrest but remained on the run. This made it hard for the Committee to issue clear instructions and lists of boycotted firms and banks.

On 17 September, during a meeting of the Dáil, Griffith claimed that the boycott was proving effective against northern banks, and proposed to appoint a man in Dublin to be in charge of its implementation, as requested by Belfast republicans. He proposed the TD for Dublin St. Michan's, Michael Staines, who was eventually persuaded to undertake the task.⁷⁷ A close friend of Michael Collins, he remained in charge of the boycott until his arrest on 6 December 1920 (he was released only at the end of June 1921).⁷⁸ It is not clear what Staines was supposed to do though. The Dáil did not vote for the constitution of a boycott office with its own budget, and it appears that Staines was merely expected to get in touch with the Belfast Boycott Committee and act as their referee in Dublin.

The organisation of the boycott was left to local councils and other bodies. In mid-September, the General Council of County Councils issued a document urging the immediate implementation of the boycott, and the Dublin Corporation organised a committee for its set-up.⁷⁹ The St. Stephen's Green Comhairle Ceanntair (Sinn Féin District Committee) in Dublin circulated a handbill stating that since Dáil Éireann had voted illegal any imposition of political and religious tests over workers, the Belfast boycott would last until the reinstatement of expelled workers in the North. Traders were invited to stop purchasing and selling Belfast produced goods, and all citizens were encouraged to boycott Northern banks.⁸⁰ In Dublin, the local IRA Brigade organised boycott patrols to warn shopkeepers against selling Belfast goods. They tracked down secret trafficking of boycotted goods with the help of republican families, shopkeepers and common people.

Despite its loose organisation, the boycott soon proved effective enough to worry the Belfast Chamber of Trade. In September 1920, its chairman appealed to Belfast retailers to

⁷⁷ *Dáil Éireann Debates*, 17 September 1920, Vol. F, No. 17. Ministerial Motions – Belfast Boycott.

⁷⁸ T. Feeney and W. Murphy, 'Staines, Michael Joseph', *DIB*.

⁷⁹ D. Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (London, 1937), p. 387.

⁸⁰ NLI, ILB 300 p 5 [item 62] (Handbill by St. Stephen's Green Comhairle Ceanntair).

support wholesale houses that were having a bad time. However, he claimed to be confident that they would not be unduly financially affected by the boycott since he knew that seven in eight of Irish traders who had habitually traded with Belfast still wanted to do so.⁸¹ It is likely that the chairman was trying to reassure his audience, and his assertion was not based on evidence. Regardless of the truthfulness of this statement, it is certain that by autumn 1920, the boycott was not yet implemented everywhere in Ireland, and it remained ineffective in many areas, although several episodes that occurred between August and September, especially in northern counties, changed the picture. For example, buyers from Belfast were notified not to attend the Roscommon horses fair, while at Ballymote (Sligo), traders and merchants agreed to cease trade with northern towns. Clare Infirmary Committee, as well as Monaghan and Cavan Lunatic Asylum, decided not to consider tenders from Belfast firms. At the same time, the boycott was rigidly enforced at Dublin market. In some cases, there was confusion about its targets, such as in Ballina (it is not clear if the paper referred to the town in Cavan or the one in Donegal). Here the chairman of the Urban Council, solicitor Rutledge, stressed that the boycott was not against local Protestants, and stated that non-Catholics in the town had complained to him that people were boycotting them.

The implementation of the boycott was already very strict in some areas. At Cootehill (Cavan), a trader who took flour from Belfast after having been warned was fined £ 20; the fine was paid. At Manorhamilton (Leitrim), a trader was arrested by the Volunteers for trading with Belfast, and released after agreeing he would cease.⁸² As at the very start of the boycott, most episodes occurred in northern areas. In Ballina, the lack of clear instructions produced what MacEntee had warned against: a boycott of local Protestants. Although there is no further evidence suggesting that Catholics targeted Protestants as a whole at this stage, it seems that they were trying to boycott Belfast goods without verifying if they were produced by firms that had expelled Catholics.

It is not clear who was in charge of enforcing the boycott, but it seems that, apart for the IRA, different organisations were involved. In Cork, Kerry and Wexford, members of the Fianna Éireann, a youth hurling league founded by Countess Markievicz, helped in raiding

⁸¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, October 1920.

⁸² *Ibid.*

train stations to seize boycotted goods. In Donegal and Derry, they were in charge of the printing and distribution of black lists.⁸³ In Leitrim and Donegal, members of Cumann na mBan, the republican women's paramilitary organisation, were active in the boycott initiative: they visited shops warning the owners against the sale of boycotted goods, and helped with the intelligence work of detecting Belfast products in their areas.⁸⁴

The Volunteers were fully involved since the early stage of the campaign, as proved by a weekly memorandum prepared by the Adjutant General on 25 October 1920. He lamented that Belfast firms were distributing their goods to merchants and agents in the South through the Parcel Post and passenger luggage. The Volunteers were called to be attentive and to encourage railway and shipping clerks, shop assistants and sorters to report such cases.⁸⁵ It is significant that there was no mention of fines to impose in case of violation of the boycott. The absence of practical directions from the Belfast Boycott Committee and the high level of discretion in the implementation of the boycott suggest that fines were the result of the autonomous initiative of local republican groups.

Despite the increasing enthusiasm for the boycott initiative manifested by some local councils and other republican bodies, a group of eight different “public figures” wrote a letter lamenting the counterproductive effects of the Belfast boycott. The letter is not dated, and despite being addressed to Dáil Éireann, it is not mentioned in parliamentary debates. It seems reasonable to assume that it was written before the end of 1920. In fact, one of the signatories, Edward MacLysaght, left Ireland for France shortly after his arrest and release in late November-early December 1920, and did not return to Ireland until the truce of July 1921.⁸⁶ Since the other signatories did not follow him to France, the letter must have been written before his departure.

The eight signatories argued that the boycott was indiscriminately damaging guilty and innocent firms in Ulster, without affecting shipyards and linen factories where expulsions had taken place. Moreover, they feared that those Catholics left unemployed, after their employers had been driven out of business by the boycott, found it very hard to get new

⁸³ BMH, statement by Liam Brady, p. 91.

⁸⁴ BMH, statement by Margaret Brady, p. 3.

⁸⁵ NLI, ILB 300 p 12 [Item 71] (Weekly memorandum no. 3).

⁸⁶ C. Lysaght, *Edward MacLysaght, 1887-1986* (Dublin, 1988), p. 14.

jobs in the North, and emigrated to the South. This resulted in “a partition of a most objectionable kind”, since Belfast and the North-East was being made economically dependent on England and foreign countries, and the area might end up inhabited only by non-Catholics and non-republicans.⁸⁷ Instead of applying the boycott to all Belfast firms, the authors suggested a careful selection of those businesses that ought to be encouraged because they had not only declined to apply religious and political tests, but dismissed those Protestant workers who refused to work with Catholics. The best thing to do was to withdraw the boycott, then ask southern traders to deal with those northern firms ready to guarantee that they would not allow political or religious tests on their employees, and subsequently issue a black list of boycotted firms.

Authors of the letter were: Erskine Childers, George William Russell, Alice Stopford Green, Edward Millington Stephens, Cecil Neill-Watson, Edward MacLysaght, James Green Douglas, and somebody whose name was James and surname started with Mc, but whose signature is otherwise unreadable. All of them advocated Irish independence, though they came from different political backgrounds. Childers had turned from the Home Rule movement to republicanism after the end of the World War, and would have become the Sinn Féin Director of Propaganda in February 1921.⁸⁸ Cecil Neill-Watson and Edward Stephens had republican sympathies, though it seems that only the latter was actively involved in politics.⁸⁹ On the other hand, the rest of the signatories held comparatively moderate views. George Russell and Edward MacLysaght were both elected as nationalist representatives to the Irish Convention in 1917.⁹⁰ They had the support of Alice Stopford Green, while James Douglas was a stout advocate of full dominion status for Ireland.⁹¹ Russell and MacLysaght were involved in the cooperative movement, while Stephens was among the founding directors of the land bank established by Dáil Éireann in December 1919. Some of them were part of a circle of artists and intellectuals. Stopford Green was a historian whose work provided historical and cultural bases for nationalism. Russell, a friend of W. B. Yeats, was a writer and an artist fascinated by occultism and theosophy whose house was attended by

⁸⁷ NAI, DE/2/110 (Belfast Boycott. Letter to the Dáil, n.d.).

⁸⁸ M. A. Hopkinson, ‘Childers, (Robert) Erskine’, *DIB*.

⁸⁹ A. Carpenter and L. W. White, ‘Stephens, Edward Millington’, *DIB*; G. Carnall, ‘The making of an internationalist’, in G. Carnall and P. Gregory, *Gandhi’s Interpreter* (Oxford, 2010), p. 31.

⁹⁰ N. Allen, ‘Russell, George William’, *DIB*.

⁹¹ J. A. Gaughan, ‘Douglas, James Green’, *DIB*.

artists and writers, while MacLysaght was involved in the Gaelic League and in the Dublin Literary Society. Childers too had written a very successful spy thriller in 1903, *The riddle of the sands*, based on his experience in the City of London Imperial Volunteers during the Boer War. Douglas ran the family business, a company of drapers and outfitters, and helped to create the White Cross, a charity in aid of victims of British depredations; Stephens was a barrister.

Apart for Russell, who was born in Lurgan, none of these people had any personal connection with Ulster or with the boycott, but some of them had showed interest in unionism before. Childers had initially underestimated the movement: during his visit in Ulster in late 1913, he had come to the conclusion that Carson was not posing a serious threat to Irish unity since he had no support outside Belfast.⁹² Stopford Green had written a pamphlet, in 1918, *Ourselves alone in Ulster*, in which she warned that, in case of partition, Catholics would be discriminated against by northern unionists. In support of her claim, she recalled that when Catholic workers were expelled from the shipyards in 1912, Carson did not condemn those brutal actions.⁹³ Memory of those events might explain Stopford Green's interest in the boycott.

However, it seems that all the authors of the letter shared concern that the form in which the Belfast boycott was implemented made partition more likely. Stopford Green later wrote with passion against the division of the country: "it is impossible to explain to an Englishman what 'partition' means to an Irishman. Since its very earliest records Ireland has been one in law, in custom, in language, in literature, in the equal fusion of its races, in the passionate devotion of its peoples to a land which with intimate affection they have always called by the name of a person".⁹⁴ Concern with Irish unity was not only sentimental: the authors of the letter genuinely believed that independence was not worth the division of the country, and they also thought that partition would not settle Irish problems. As Russell wrote in December 1917, partition was not the solution for the antagonism between nationalism and unionism since "there is no geographical limitation of these passions".⁹⁵

⁹² J. Ring, *Erskine Childers* (London, 1996), p. 134.

⁹³ A. Stopford Green, *Ourselves alone in Ulster* (Dublin, 1918), pp. 13-4.

⁹⁴ A. Stopford Green, *The government of Ireland* (London, 1921), p. 6.

⁹⁵ *The Irish Times*, 19 December 1917.

Considering their different religions (Childers, MacLysaght, Douglas and Stopford Green were born Protestants, whereas the others were Catholics), political, and occupational backgrounds, it is likely that they believed that the reconciliation of political and religious identities should have been a priority for Sinn Féin. Therefore, as argued in the letter, neither religion nor geography should determine the inclusion of firms into black lists, but only their treatment of workers. This argument might be partly justified by Russell and MacLysaght's closeness to socialism, but it is likely that all the signatories regretted what they saw as a missed opportunity for Sinn Féin to prove itself a non-sectarian and inclusive movement.

Childers and the other signatories of the letter were the first to raise the question of the possible counterproductive effects of the boycott, and to worry about its consequences for northern Catholics who had not been expelled from their workplaces. The republican leadership, however, did not share these concerns. By the end of 1920, they were split into those who opposed the Belfast boycott fearing that it might contribute to the partition, and those who supported it as a means to coerce Ulster unionists into accepting Irish independence. Despite the fact that the boycott was initially devised in retaliation for the expulsion of Catholic workers in the North-East, the debate quickly shifted to its implications for the future of Ireland. Discussion in the Dáil shows a certain degree of ignorance of the situation in Belfast, due to inattention and reluctance to face the Ulster question.

At this stage only a few, such as Ernest Blythe and the authors of the above mentioned letter, openly expressed concern that the boycott was reinforcing unionists' fears that they would not be treated fairly in all-Ireland state. It appears that in Belfast republicans were understandably anxious to give a strong response to unionists' violence, without considering long-term consequences. They looked to Dublin for logistical support, since by September 1920 many of the members of the Belfast boycott committee had been arrested or were on the run. However, northern republicans looked to Dublin not only for material help, but also for legitimisation. In their eyes, a cohesive response to loyalist violence in Belfast by an all-Ireland nationalist front would have threatened unionists and persuaded them to drop their opposition to Irish self-government. Despite the centrality of the partition question to the debate over the boycott, the nationalist press ignored this aspect. It stressed the sectarian

character of violence in Belfast, and helped to raise some degree of solidarity towards northern Catholics in the rest of Ireland just before the partition.

In December 1920, the Government of Ireland Act was finally approved and received Royal Assent. It established two parliaments in Ireland, one in Belfast with power over six of the nine Ulster counties, and one in Dublin legislating for the rest of the country. Republicans continued to fight for the Irish Republic and refused to consider the partition as a *fait accompli*, since the Government of Ireland Act would have come into force only once the two parliaments had opened and elected representatives had taken their seats. Thus, the Sinn Féin leadership, and Michael Collins in particular, designed a strategy to undermine the implementation of partition. This strategy was based on the unity of the republican front in the North, and on the Belfast boycott.⁹⁶

It is hard to determine if the Belfast boycott contributed to the partition of Ireland eventually. Since its application was very limited and, at least in its early stage, it did not seriously affect northern business, it probably did not have any effect on the matter. But partition did give a new impetus to the boycott initiative, and thus it can be said that instead of making partition more likely, it was partition that reinforced the boycott.

- **The Department of Belfast boycott**

On 25 January 1921, Ernest Blythe read a report on the organisation of the Belfast boycott to the Dáil. Blythe's department was making efforts to identify traders still dealing with Belfast firms through the vigilance of republican activists at the Dublin terminals of the Great Northern Railway, but it was hard to stop goods at the ports since they arrived with no trace of their origin. Another difficulty was the fact that many Belfast firms had depots in Britain through which their goods were re-directed to Ireland, and it was impossible to identify those products. Moreover, Belfast traders had started to work to recover from their losses: they had arranged to re-distribute their goods under disguise from Dundalk, Portadown and Lisburn, and they were sending their best agents south with instructions to do all they could to get back orders. Blythe concluded by assuring that in order "to counter

⁹⁶ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 108.

this push”, the Trade Department was organising a powerful press campaign and instructing the Republican Army to be particularly alert.⁹⁷

After having left the bulk of the boycott’s organisation to local administrations and to the Belfast Committee, the Government of the Irish Republic seemed ready to step in and take control. Blythe, who had fiercely opposed the boycott in August 1920, was now reporting on its implementation and coordinating efforts to make it more effective. Certainly, the Sinn Féin Ulster policy had changed to some extent due to the Government of Ireland Act. Before its approval, the republican leadership were willing to show tolerance towards unionists, in an attempt to persuade them to drop their resistance to Irish independence. Now they seemed persuaded that the only way to stop the implementation of partition was by intimidation.

Blythe’s report was completed by a table listing local bodies and committees formed in many southern counties (the set-up of boycott committees in northern areas had been left to the Belfast Committee).⁹⁸

County	No. of Councils in the Area	No. of Councils which formed Committees
Clare	11	11
Kerry	7	7
Roscommon	3	3
Cavan	10	4
Cork	20	9
Galway	10	6
Kildare	7	4
Kilkenny	6	3
King’s Co.	4	2
Limerick	5	2
Longford	2	1
Louth	4	2
Mayo	8	5
Meath	6	3
Monaghan	5	1
Queen’s Co.	4	1
Sligo	3	1
Tipperary (South Riding)	7	2

⁹⁷ NAI, DE/2/110 (Belfast Boycott. Resume. 20 January 1921).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Tipperary (North Riding)	5	2
Waterford	5	3
Westmeath	6	2
Wexford	4	3
Wicklow	5	3

As the above table shows, there were more than 80 local boycott committees in the South of Ireland. According to the report, most of them were organised by municipal bodies. In 14 of the 23 counties listed, half or more of the local councils had established boycott committees, and in three cases (Clare, Kerry and Roscommon), all the local councils had committees. These numbers suggest that the response of local administrations to the call for a boycott of Belfast goods was overall positive, despite the lack of funding and publicity that the initiative suffered. However, during the debate that followed Blythe's report, Sean MacEntee lamented that nationalists in Belfast were finding it hard to persuade people in the South that they had a duty to collaborate with the boycott, and he stressed the necessity of creating a "proper public opinion" to guarantee the success of the initiative.⁹⁹ He also complained that too much was expected from the Belfast Committee, and insisted that the boycott had to be organised and directed from Dublin. The Belfast Committee could not supply much information about goods leaving the town, since they could not find anybody to help them in booking offices or dispatch offices. He urged an effective propaganda campaign to be set up in the South, and concluded his intervention by saying that the Belfast Committee could not be blamed for the lack of interest of southerners.

Although TDs generally agreed on the necessity of mobilising southern public opinion, they initially appeared more interested in the possibility of starting a boycott of English goods in order to support the home market than in the situation in the North. In the end, the Dáil approved an allocation of £ 2,500 for the boycott's organisation and propaganda, while Joseph MacDonagh, TD for Tipperary North who had been in touch with the Belfast Committee, was appointed Substitute Minister for Labour (the Minister, Countess Markievicz, was imprisoned), with responsibility for the boycott.¹⁰⁰ Northern and southern seemed to agree only on the fact that the boycott had not been successful up to then, and that this was due to its poor organisation and lack of popular support. Whereas MacEntee

⁹⁹ *Dáil Éireann Debates*, 25 January 1921, Vol. F, No. 19. Departmental Reports – Belfast Boycott.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

blamed the disinterest of the Dáil and their failure in implementing a propaganda campaign in the South, Collins accused the Belfast Committee of not having supplied them with adequate information. Eventually, the designation of MacDonagh and the designation of a substantial sum for the implementation of the boycott were met with general agreement. The Belfast Committee had finally obtained Dublin's direct involvement, while the Dáil had found somebody willing to deal with the boycott organisation according to their priorities.

It is significant that the debate did not even mention the purpose of the boycott. It had not prevented partition, nor it had helped the reinstatement of expelled workers, but what exactly was its end, after the approval of the Government of Ireland Act, was not openly stated. The fact that the boycott was to be extended to English goods suggests that it was part of a strategy to force the British government to open negotiations with republicans. However, it is likely that the boycott of Belfast goods was intended also to prove the impracticability of the partition by showing the impossibility of Northern Ireland achieving economic independence from the rest of the island. This was confirmed by an interview released by Eamon de Valera to the Associated Press in March 1921. The Dáil President said that republicans were considering the implementation of economic measures to show northern unionists that their interests would be damaged once they were cut off from their markets in the rest of Ireland. He declared: "The boycott of Belfast goods which is now operating is but the opening stage of what will become a complete and absolute exclusion of Belfast goods if the partition act is put into effect".¹⁰¹

Joseph MacDonagh had worked as a customs-and-excise officer, and was an expert in income tax recovery. He had been in touch with the Belfast Committee since the arrest of Michael Staines in early December 1920, and even before his designation as Director of the boycott, he had suggested to the Dáil Cabinet some measures to improve the campaign. He proposed the appointment of eight regional organisers to set up committees in every town, vigilance committees to spot goods and Belfast travellers on railway stations, and the distribution of handbills listing manufacturers, agents, merchants and wholesalers.¹⁰² After his designation, he immediately created a team of organisers constituting the Department

¹⁰¹ C. J. C. Street, *Ireland in 1921* (London, 1922), p. 59.

¹⁰² D. S. Johnson, 'The Belfast Boycott', in J. M. Goldstrom and L. A. Clarkson (eds), *Irish Population, Economy and Society* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 290-1.

of Belfast Boycott that at its disbandment in early 1922 counted 13 officers.¹⁰³ However, since he spent most of the time he was in charge of the boycott on the run, and was arrested several times, his designation might have impacted on the efficiency of the campaign.

Soon after his appointment, MacDonagh wrote a letter to local Councils to inform them about the situation in Belfast and to suggest measures to improve the boycott. He summarized the expulsions and the riots of the previous seven months by presenting them as part of “an anti-Catholic and anti-Irish crusade”, and described the assaulters as “religious and political bigots”.¹⁰⁴ The main goal of the Belfast boycott was the reinstatement and compensation of all the expelled workers, and the end of political and religious tests. MacDonagh called for a stand for liberty and trade unionism against bigotry, since Catholics had “no quarrel with Protestants as such” and only wanted to live in peace.¹⁰⁵ However, this appeared very difficult in Belfast and other areas of the Six Counties that Britain wanted to become a state governed by the same Orange leaders that had encouraged violence against Catholics. MacDonagh bitterly stated that “The whole terrible business is a fitting commentary on PARTITION and on what those who differ from the Orange majority in religion or politics may expect should it ever be enforced”.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, the necessity to build up an efficient boycott of Belfast goods was more urgent than before. Local Councils were called to form committees whose tasks were to persuade shopkeepers to cease selling Belfast goods, to expel travellers employed by Belfast firms, to ask people to transfer their accounts from Ulster banks to other Irish banks. Only the boycott could prove that partition would mean the creation of an insuperable tariff barrier against Belfast.

Once again, it seemed that the bulk of the organisation of the boycott was left to local bodies, thus leaving the initiative to local administrators who enjoyed a high degree of independence from Dublin. There were no lists of boycotted firms attached to the circular from Dublin, nor clear indications of what towns were to be affected. This made it hard for southerners to recognize what northern goods had to be boycotted, as letters written by

¹⁰³ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Memorial to Cabinet on behalf of the staff of the Boycott Organisation).

¹⁰⁴ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Letter from Joseph MacDonagh to the Mayor or Chairman of Local Authorities in Ireland).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

private citizens to the Department of Boycott or to the Ministry for Trade and Commerce, asking for clarification over specific products confirm.¹⁰⁷

Confusion over the application of the boycott was due to the change affecting the campaign's aim. While at first the official purpose of the boycott was the reinstatement of the expelled workers, by 1921 it was part of the Sinn Féin anti-partition strategy. Therefore, those firms guilty of Catholics' expulsions were not the main target anymore, since it was against all those who endorsed partition, virtually all northern Protestants, that republicans were fighting. This seems to be confirmed by the lack of consideration of unionists' reaction. When MacEntee first proposed the boycott to the Dáil he specified that this was not a sectarian response to sectarian violence.

In disagreement with him, Blythe pointed out to the risk of confirming unionists' prejudices, while the signatories of the already mentioned letter to the Dáil in 1920 had asked for an end of the boycott against those Protestants who had not allowed political and religious tests on their employees. On the contrary, MacDonagh did not worry about unionists' opinion, nor did he recommend any distinction in the application of the boycott. Moreover, he ignored the counterproductive effects that the boycott had already produced, whereas the letter by Childers and others lamented that northern Catholics left unemployed because of the boycott would have had no choice but to emigrate south or overseas.

Another letter by the Belfast Committee to the Ministry at Dáil Éireann gave details of Belfast businessmen who had closed or transferred their firms because they had been damaged by the boycott.¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately, the letter is not dated, and it is hard to determine when it was written. There is no mention of any particular event such as the Government of Ireland Act or the 1921 elections, nor of partition in general. The fact that the letter is addressed to the Ministry and not generally to the Dáil suggests that it was written after MacDonagh, as Minister of Labour, had taken control of the boycott initiative after 25 January 1921. The letter listed some oilskin manufacturers, printers and stationers,

¹⁰⁷ NAI, INDC/ EMR/1/3 (Department of Industry and Commerce, Boycott of goods manufactured in Britain and in Belfast. Mar. 1921-Sep. 22).

¹⁰⁸ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Letter to the Ministry, Dáil Éireann, n.d.). The firms listed were: Messrs Casey, Oilskin manufacturers; Messrs Kilmartin and Son, General Printers and Stationers; the Irish Decorative Art Association; Miss E. McDermott firm engaged in the Irish Decorative Art Industry; D. McCullough, Bagpipe manufacturer; firms in the distributing trade.

the Irish Decorative Art Association, drapers, firms producing boots and leather, fruit distributors and others that had either already left Belfast, or were preparing to do so. The most famous case was that of Denis McCullough, ex-President of the IRB and one of the members of the Belfast Boycott Committee formed by Bishop MacRory in August 1920. Despite the fact that he employed only republicans, McCullough was forced to close his bagpipe factory in Belfast since people in the South had turned to British pipes.

The Belfast Committee lamented that the transfer of businesses was making Belfast, “nationally the weakest part of Ireland, still weaker”.¹⁰⁹ It was legitimate for Belfast Catholics to expect the Dáil, to which they owed allegiance, to support their position in the “Garrison city”.¹¹⁰ They were not asking for an end to the boycott, but an amendment to the Dáil Decree prohibiting Belfast firms to trade with the rest of Ireland, allowing those who gave guarantees to obtain licenses to do business with the South. This would have fostered existing firms, and encouraged Catholics to start new businesses instead of emigrating. “Thus, by getting a stronger hold upon the commercial life of the City the Irish community would incidentally irishise (sic) Belfast, and would be a compact force ready at all time to oppose foreign influence in this City, where foreign influence, at least unofficially, will for some time continue to dominate”.¹¹¹ By this reading, southern support to the Catholic community in Belfast was necessary to oppose British influence over the unionist population, thus allowing republicans to retain some control of the town.

Due to the impossibility of dating the letter from the Belfast Committee, it is not certain that MacDonagh was aware of its content by the time he wrote to local administrations. However, in the following months, other episodes in which Catholics had been victims of the Belfast boycott were reported, not only to MacDonagh.¹¹²

- **Functioning and malfunctioning of the boycott**

As already mentioned, the war between the IRA and the British Army continued after the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² NAI, INDC/ EMR/1/3 (Department of Industry and Commerce, Boycott of goods manufactured in Britain and in Belfast. Mar. 1921-Sep. 22).

approval of the Government of Ireland Act, exacting hundreds of victims among Crown forces, republican fighters and civilians. In the North, “the scale of operations (...) was small compared with that in the rest of the country”, and violence was generally the result of sectarian hostility.¹¹³ Finally, a truce between the IRA and the British came into force on 11 July 1921, and negotiations for a settlement started in London. It soon became evident that it would be difficult for the Irish delegation to win concessions on Ulster now that the Conservatives were in power and Northern Ireland had a functioning government. In the end, the Ulster question became subordinate to the issue of the oath of allegiance to the Crown, but remained a tactical device: in case of collapse of the negotiations, the Irish would blame it on the reluctance of the British government to meet their demands for the unity of Ireland.¹¹⁴

Around one year after the expulsions, the failure of the boycott initiative in forcing the reinstatement of Catholic workers was apparent, and some private citizens made suggestions to those in charge of the campaign. Francis McArdle, a Belfast businessman, wrote to Rev. Dr MacRory suggesting measures to prevent the emigration of highly skilled craftsmen and to create work for Catholics. After listing the main firms from which Catholics were expelled, he proposed the establishment of Textile Engineering Firms to capture a portion of the trade to European countries. That business would form a nucleus for other allied trades and works such as Structural Steel-Work, Heating and Ventilating Work, Engine and Boiler Construction and Repair work.¹¹⁵ Although McArdle did not openly express his disappointment, it is likely that his suggestions arose from the frustration at the failure of the boycott initiative in helping the expelled workers.

In July 1921, William O’Brien, General Treasurer of the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union, received a letter from John Quigley, Secretary of the Monaghan branch of the Union.¹¹⁶ Quigley wrote that Monaghan used to be the best centre for the distribution trade in Ulster, but since that trade was in the hands of unionists, the local boycott committee had diverted it away from the town. The result was that the trade had passed to Portadown,

¹¹³ M. Laffan, *The partition of Ireland, 1911-1925* (Dublin, 1987), pp. 75-6.

¹¹⁴ J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 52.

¹¹⁵ COFLA, ARCH/11/5/14 (MacRory papers, Belfast Expelled Workers’ Fund. Letter from Francis McArdle, 7 July 1921).

¹¹⁶ NAI, INDC/ EMR/1/3 (Department of Industry and Commerce, Boycott of goods manufactured in Britain and in Belfast, Mar. 1921-Sept. 1922. Letter from John Quigley to William O’Brien, 18 July 1921).

“the most bigoted town in Ulster outside Belfast”, while Quigley and his colleagues were practically unemployed.¹¹⁷ Quigley asked O’Brien to appeal to the two Monaghan representatives (Ernest Blythe and Eoin O’Duffy) to facilitate the return of trade from Portadown to Monaghan. Here, as in the already mentioned 1920 letter from Childers to the Dáil, and in the Belfast Committee letter, the boycott initiative in itself that was not under question, although there were no comments on its achievements. The application of the boycott was criticised on the ground that it was damaging Catholics, instead of helping them. John Quigley, the Belfast Committee and the authors of the 1920 letter did not consider the boycott only as a punitive weapon against the enemy, but also as an opportunity to foster nationalist business. Indeed, they made suggestions in that direction.

In some cases, those involved in the implementation of the boycott were hostile to the idea of Catholic firms taking advantage of the boycott. For example, Sean McConville, IRA Commandant in Armagh, remembered that a Catholic Bakery firm, Barney Hughes Ltd, was included in black lists in order to prevent them from selling bread for other boycotted firms.¹¹⁸ It seems that some Catholic firms were added to black lists because republicans suspected them of secretly distributing products for boycotted ones.

Occasionally, local Catholic businessmen tried to take advantage of the boycott. In December 1921, the South Down Unionist Association wrote to Sir Dawson Bates, Minister of Home Affairs of the Northern Parliament, lamenting a strict boycott of two grocers in Newry. The Association claimed that it was well known that local rival firms were enforcing the boycott for trade purposes and not for political aims.¹¹⁹ It is reasonable to assume that, wherever the boycott was successfully enforced, Catholic firms generally gained advantage over boycotted ones, as confirmed by the example of Monaghan town, where several local firms specialised in the sale of boycotted goods and significantly increased their trade.¹²⁰ Moreover, the presence of businessmen in local committees raises doubts over the integrity of the operation. It is possible that, at least in some cases, they manipulated black lists for their own advantage. This was more likely to happen with local black lists, independently

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ BMH, statement by Sean McConville, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ PRONI, HA/5/105 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Newry. Correspondence between the South Down Unionist Association and Sir Dawson Bates, Dec. 1921-Jan. 22).

¹²⁰ BMH, statement by Philip Marron, p. 7.

compiled by local committees, than with national lists that were subject to a higher degree of scrutiny by the Boycott Department.

As stated by John Quigley, Portadown was one of the main trade centres in Ulster, and an important distributor of Belfast goods. For this reason, in October 1921, the Belfast Committee informed the Dáil that they had added Portadown to their black list. However, Diarmuid O'Hegarty, at the time serving as secretary to the Irish delegation at the Treaty negotiations, wrote to the Director of the Boycott to express the views of the members of the Cabinet who were in London with him. They questioned the wisdom of adding Portadown to the black list.¹²¹ Interestingly, O'Hegarty stressed the fact that the boycott was originally enforced in response to the imposition of religious and political tests in Belfast, and thus the inclusion of Portadown in the black list might be considered unfair. He mentioned the case of Chapman, a jam manufacturer who had always been evenhanded with employees, and whose products would be excluded from the South if Portadown was boycotted. He finally suggested dealing with guilty firms individually instead of placing Portadown as a whole on the black list.

The correspondence between the Belfast Committee and O'Hegarty suggests that the boycott was an important question for the Treaty delegation even when they were busy with the London negotiations. It is, however, reasonable to wonder why the Belfast Committee informed the delegation instead of the Department of Boycott in Dublin. It is clear that, despite the efficient organisation of the Department by MacDonagh, the Belfast Committee retained a certain independence and that, in general, the Dublin Committee was not fully in control of local committees, as confirmed by the locally-produced black lists and by the discretion with which local committees applied the boycott.

According to de Valera, by October 1921 more than 30,000 black lists had been circulated; however, very few of them survive.¹²² Black lists were issued by local committees as well as by the Belfast Committee. The former listed local businesses distributing Belfast goods and had a limited circulation. The latter had national character but were incomplete, since they focused on Dublin and northern towns. For example, a black list whose second issue was in

¹²¹ NAI, DE/2/110 (Belfast Boycott. Letter from Diarmuid O'Hegarty to the Director of Boycott, 1 November 1921.)

¹²² *The Irish Times*, 28 October 1921.

April 1921 reported twenty firms that were distributing Belfast goods and five agents for Belfast firms in Dublin, nineteen firms in different towns in Northern Ireland, while only two firms in Cork and one in Limerick.¹²³ On the other hand, local lists were sometimes so long that they compromised the implementation of the boycott itself. For example, a black list circulated in Newry in December 1921 contained the names of 114 firms either trading with Belfast or having accounts in northern banks. According to the local RIC District Inspector, the high number of firms listed made the boycott impracticable.¹²⁴

Another black list issued in November 1921 by the Derry Committee was a booklet of eleven pages.¹²⁵ On the cover, it was written that “the boycott will be enforced until employment is thrown open to all without distinction of creed or politics, and organised outrage on the Belfast public ceases”. All the firms forwarding Belfast goods and newspapers were boycotted, as well as the Northern Bank, the Ulster Bank and the Belfast Bank. The list comprised the names of 61 commercial travellers and commission agents in Derry, Dublin and Belfast dealing with boycotted firms, 53 Derry grocers located in Catholic areas of the town, 24 drapers and tens of other businesses such as tobacconists and electricians.

There was also a list of “those supporting Belfast in the Northern Area”, including 71 people, most of whom were resident in Donegal and a few in Tyrone and Fermanagh. Thirty-eight names were associated with business activities such as draperies and confectioneries, while the remaining 33 were listed as private citizens. Among the latter, according to the 1911 Census of Ireland, some were merchants and grocers, while some were farmers, a category never found in other black lists.¹²⁶ Farmers might have been listed to prevent traders from buying their products, although this does not seem likely since farmers’ names were listed without specifying their profession. This suggests that “those supporting Belfast in the Northern Area” were to be boycotted regardless of their business, as if they were to be ostracised. This may be confirmed by the fact that, according to the 1911 Census, 38 out of 71 people listed were Protestants, while only seven were Catholics (it was not possible to find definite information about the others). The high number of Protestants listed even

¹²³ NLI, EPH D305 (Belfast Trade Boycott, black list, 2nd issue).

¹²⁴ PRONI, HA/5/105 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Newry. Report of RIC District Inspector, 5 December 1921).

¹²⁵ NLI, Ir 3239 p 62 (Belfast Trade Boycott, black list no. 5).

¹²⁶ 1911 Census of Ireland.

without specifying their business suggests a sectarian approach to the boycott by the Derry Committee.

Black lists were continuously modified with names added and removed. In these cases, the Director of Boycott informed local bodies about changes that generally regarded Dublin and northern firms.¹²⁷ The main reason why lists were continuously modified was the payment of fines by boycotted firms. In general, the boycott was pressed to the point that the target had no choice but to pay the fine to have their names removed. The Church acted as intermediary in some cases, and fines were paid to the local boycott committee or to the Volunteers.

Occasionally, people were fined not for having sold Belfast products, but for having bought them. For example, in December 1921, a *Belfast Telegraph* agent in Clogher valley (Tyrone) lamented that at least forty people had been fined by a Sinn Féin court in county Monaghan (about three miles away from the border) for having purchased copies of the *Belfast Telegraph*. The court had been informed by spies picketing the town and taking down the names of people entering Protestant shops. Moreover, forty young men and women had been summoned for their attendance at a ball of the Aughnacloy United Football Club, composed by both Protestants and Catholics.¹²⁸ According to later reports, thanks to fines and intimidation, the boycott was successfully enforced in the Clogher valley.¹²⁹

Small firms were more vulnerable than big ones, and when they refused to pay fines, they were easily boycotted. For example, Miss Ellen Reilly, from Arva (Cavan), was fined £5 for selling Belfast goods. She refused to pay and consequently, she had her house picketed and customers were prevented from entering her shop.¹³⁰ Years later, when she claimed for compensation, she asserted that her trade was ruined by the boycott.

In some cases, however, fines were not enough to persuade people to boycott Belfast firms. The Dublin United Tramway Co. had transported Belfast goods, advertised boycotted firms

¹²⁷ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Letter from the Director of Boycott to the Secretary, 9 Dec. 1921).

¹²⁸ PRONI, HA/5/108 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Aughnacloy. Letter from *Belfast Telegraph* agent to Sir R. H. H. Baird, 17 Dec. 1921).

¹²⁹ PRONI, HA/5/108 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Aughnacloy. Letter from Lieutenant Colonel Divisional Commissioner to the Minister for Home Affairs, 5 Jan. 1922).

¹³⁰ NAI, DFA/1/GR/1291 (Correspondence between Miss Reilly and the Minister for External Affairs, 3 February 1930).

on its tram tickets and displayed boycotted advertisements.¹³¹ Many people complained about this with the Committee in Dublin and demanded that the firm was fined. The Committee imposed a fine of £300, but the company refused to pay. When finally the Committee appealed to the Cabinet, in December '21, they lamented that the size of the firm made them powerless, and suggested a blanket boycott of the tram company.

It is not clear what criteria regulated the imposition of fines, and it seems that their application was subject to a high level of discretion. This contributed to increasing resentment by those who were fined, but also led many to question the legality of the boycott itself. After the end of the Civil War many people who had paid fines claimed compensation. In October 1923, the Minister for Finance stated that he had received several claims for return of monies collected by way of fines in connection with the Belfast boycott, and that the total amount was around £3,800.¹³²

Most of those claiming compensation stressed that they were not given any opportunity to defend themselves in court, as in the case of Ballymote (Sligo). Here, in October 1921, nineteen people were fined for having accounts in the Ulster Bank. The fines ranged between £50 and £5, in most cases being £25 or £12. Normally business premises of these people were picketed until they agreed to pay.¹³³ As this case and that of Miss Ellen Reilly demonstrate, sometimes the imposition of fines appeared arbitrary to the victims despite the fact that the Belfast boycott was officially sanctioned by the Dáil.

In general, seized Belfast goods were subsequently destroyed, in order to avoid the accusation that the IRA took them for their own use.¹³⁴ However, they did not always follow this procedure. For example, a large quantity of northern tobacco and cigarettes found by the IRA in Dublin was first stored and, after some time, sent to interned republicans in Ballykinlar.¹³⁵ At Ennis (Clare), Belfast goods were repeatedly seized at the railway station. Most of the goods were biscuits that the local Boycott Committee regularly distributed

¹³¹ NAI, DE/2/110 (Belfast Boycott. Letter from the Belfast Trade Boycott, Central Committee, Dublin, to the Cabinet, 3 Dec. 1921).

¹³² NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Extract from Provisional Government Minutes. 13 Oct. 1923. Item 2).

¹³³ NAI, FIN/1/3471 (Belfast Boycott: Ulster Bank. Letter from W. J. O'Reilly, Sligo, to the Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, 20 July 1923).

¹³⁴ BMH, statement by Philip Marron, p. 6-7.

¹³⁵ BMH, statement by Joseph Kinsella, p. 13.

among Sinn Féin supporters.¹³⁶ These episodes suggest that the boycott campaign was not carried out with the same attention to form everywhere, but was subject to arbitrary choices by those who enforced it.

- **The boycott in Northern Ireland and border counties**

In the table attached to Blythe's report, two out of the five border counties that were part of the Southern Ireland State, Donegal and Leitrim, are not reported, while only half or even less of the local councils of Cavan, Monaghan and Louth had created boycott committees by January 1921. However, as already mentioned, it was in northern counties that the boycott initially gained support. This is confirmed by the fact that in January 1921, the only boycott incidents reported in Ireland took place in Cavan, Monaghan, Tyrone and Londonderry.¹³⁷ In general, they involved bread carts from Belfast attacked and burned by republicans, which suggests that bread was one of the main boycotted products traded across Northern Ireland and border counties. Incidents were not only occasioned by the seizure of Belfast-produced goods, but arose also out of local sectarian tensions. Already in September 1920, Catholics were reported to be boycotting Protestants' shops in northern counties such as Monaghan.¹³⁸

Despite initial enthusiasm it seems that in 1921, while in the South the boycott was becoming more widespread and organised, it lost momentum in the North. The *Interim Report of the Proceedings of the Department of Labour*, published in 1922, admitted the difficulty of setting up boycott committees in the counties of Antrim, Down and Londonderry.¹³⁹ Antrim in particular was the only county of Northern Ireland where no incidents arising from the boycott were registered between February and September 1921.¹⁴⁰ In county Armagh the boycott was reported more or less effective according to the sources: John McCoy, IRA Commandant, stated that since the campaign had caused "great

¹³⁶ BMH, statement by Peter O'Loughlin, p. 7.

¹³⁷ D. S. Johnson, 'The Belfast Boycott', in J. M. Goldstrom and L. A. Clarkson (eds), *Irish Population, Economy and Society* (Oxford, 1981), p. 292.

¹³⁸ *The Irish Times*, 16 September 1920.

¹³⁹ Dáil Éireann, *Official Report for the periods 16-26 August 1921 and 28 February to 8 June 1922* (Dublin, 1922), pp. 30-31.

¹⁴⁰ D. S. Johnson, 'The Belfast Boycott', in J. M. Goldstrom and L. A. Clarkson (eds), *Irish Population, Economy and Society* (Oxford, 1981), p. 292.

embarrassment to northern business houses”, his division decided to intensify it after the signing of the Treaty.¹⁴¹ J. J. Murray, IRA Captain in county Armagh, stated that, although effective in annoying and demoralising local unionists, there was little activity connected with the boycott in the county.¹⁴²

In Monaghan, the IRA efficiently organised the boycott: they surveyed shops selling Belfast goods, especially bread, flour, seeds and fertilisers, and warned shopkeepers to cease such trade. They carried on regular inspections and designated special intelligence officers. Boycotted goods were seized from purchasers and destroyed. Intimidation was generally effective, and the burning of a Belfast bread-cart was enough to stop the distribution of Belfast bread.¹⁴³ A similar episode occurred, in the Camlough area (Armagh) in early 1921, where a bread-cart was put off the road and burned. As a consequence, the Belfast firm distributing bread in the area ceased the trade.¹⁴⁴ However, intimidation of this kind was not always effective. J. J. Murray remembered that republicans burned several bread-carts in the area of Lurgan (Armagh), but one day a bread-server got another cart and told them: “This is another cart you can burn tomorrow”.¹⁴⁵ It appears that the man was not very intimidated.

A famous episode in the history of the boycott took place in county Monaghan. On 23 April 1921, a train carrying Belfast produced goods and night mails was held up and set on fire around Glasslough on its way to Monaghan town.¹⁴⁶ The IRA had closed the gates at a level-crossing and placed a bogey – a chassis on wheels – between the rails. The driver stopped the train and at that point, around 200 armed men took him, the guard and the fireman away before setting fire. The press focused on the burning of the train that continued all night and morning, and ended with 23 out of 35 wagons completely destroyed. The rails were warped and twisted, and traffic did not resume until two days after. It was reported that the attackers searched the train and sacked the mail van, and that a great quantity of

¹⁴¹ BMH, statement by John McCoy, p. 118.

¹⁴² BMH, statement by J. J. Murray, p. 11.

¹⁴³ BMH, statement by John McGahey, p. 15.

¹⁴⁴ BMH, statement by Peadar Barry, p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ BMH, statement by J. J. Murray, p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ *The Anglo-Celt*, 30 April 1921.

foodstuff was lost in the fire. However, the attack on the train was not reported as part of the boycott campaign by the press.

Actions of this kind were carried on not only to prevent the distribution of boycotted goods, but also to find out traders who disregarded the boycott and traded with Belfast. In the case of Glasslough, republicans were able to trace traders breaching the boycott thanks to the invoices they seized. They found out that several traders, who had already been warned against dealing with Belfast firms, continued to do so. They even discovered an invoice for drapery from a boycotted firm to the Chairman of the Boycott Committee in Monaghan town.¹⁴⁷ The man was sentenced by the Sinn Féin Courts and had to pay a fine.

There were other episodes of trains attacked and burned, such as that on 14 July 1921 at Gortavoy (Tyrone), but they were rare since they required accurate planning and a consistent number of men involved. Most of them occurred in counties Monaghan, under the direction of General Eoin O'Duffy, and Tyrone. In most raids on trains carrying boycotted goods, these were burned or destroyed, in order to avoid the accusation that the IRA seized them for their own use.¹⁴⁸ In smaller raids too, such as those involving shops and bread-carts, the goods were normally destroyed. However, as in the already mentioned cases of Dublin and Ennis, there were exceptions. In autumn 1920, the Volunteers took control of Creighanroe station (Monaghan) and when the train from Belfast arrived they confiscated all the Belfast produced goods they found. Subsequently, they donated food and clothing to the poor of the district.¹⁴⁹ In Donegal, raided food and other perishable goods were distributed among refugees from Belfast and Derry that had fled their homes because of the expulsions and violence in summer 1920.¹⁵⁰ This often gave the opportunity to some republicans for trading boycotted goods with shopkeepers, whereas in other cases the same goods were stored and consumed in IRA quarters. The potential for latent discipline amongst Republicans was evident.

Different sources disagree about the success of the boycott. For example, on 17 December 1921, *The Ulster Herald* reported a series of "alarming incidents" arising from the boycott in

¹⁴⁷ BMH, statement by Philip Marron, pp. 6-7.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁴⁹ BMH, statement by Peter Woods, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ BMH, statement by Michael O'Donoghue, p. 253.

Dromore, county Tyrone. According to the *Herald*, a few days before, picketing had been carried out to enforce the boycott, and when the crowd following a cart out of town had refused to clear away, the police had waylaid several young men and then beaten them. Immediately after the publication of the newspaper, a local sergeant wrote to the District Inspector in Omagh to dismiss the claims of the *Herald*. According to the sergeant, though black lists had been circulated on the day mentioned by the newspaper, there had been no disorders in the town, and local residents seemed unconcerned about the boycott.¹⁵¹ It is possible that the *Herald* tried to raise nationalist sympathy for the campaign by overplaying police repression. The paper was published by the North West of Ireland Printing and Publishing Company, belonging to Michael Lynch, a prominent Sinn Féiner since 1917. Although his newspapers did not advocate the establishment of a republic, they well represented those nationalists of Fermanagh and Tyrone who saw partition as a temporary situation, and refused to recognise the authority of the Belfast parliament.

The nationalist press was not the only one to overplay the success of the boycott campaign in the North. Unionist associations occasionally appealed to the Belfast government lamenting economic losses of Protestants' businesses, and suggesting a counter-boycott of southern goods. In November 1921, Alexander Wilson Hungerford, the new Secretary to the Ulster Unionist Council, wrote to Sir Dawson Bates, Minister for Home Affairs, lamenting that Sinn Féiners were very active in destroying goods and waylaying people throughout county Armagh. However, Dawson Bates, who had preceded Hungerford as Secretary of the Ulster Unionist Council, replied to say that according to the County Inspector the boycott in Armagh was a complete failure.¹⁵² Dawson Bates' promptness in dismissing Hungerford's claims suggests that the boycott had not seriously damaged local businesses in Armagh. This is confirmed by the lack of further complaints or evidence about the intimidation of customers entering Protestant shops, as occurred in other northern areas.

These episodes occurred frequently in county Tyrone, and they were the result of the occasional intervention of southern agents, such as in the case of Strabane, where southern IRA soldiers prevented customers from entering Protestants' shops, or in the case of Aughnacloy, where people were summoned by Sinn Féin courts in Southern Ireland, as

¹⁵¹ PRONI, HA/5/107 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Dromore).

¹⁵² PRONI, HA/5/103 (Boycott of Belfast goods, county Armagh).

already mentioned.¹⁵³ In Aughnacloy the boycott's success rested on the intervention of southern agents. However interesting, it remains unique in the history of the Belfast boycott.

Evidence suggests that the success of the boycott rested on the dedication of local republicans more than on the spontaneous solidarity of common citizens. However, even where Sinn Féin leaders devoted much energy to the implementation of the boycott, they were not necessarily successful as, for example, in Newry. Newry Sinn Féin leadership was very dedicated and aggressive. Deeply resenting partition and the Belfast administration, Newry Sinn Féin clubs took an anti-Treaty stance in 1922. As already mentioned, the local black list contained 114 firms including the names of three eminent local Sinn Féiners (a grocer, a merchant and a confectioner).¹⁵⁴ However, according to the South Down Unionist Association, only three firms were seriously damaged.¹⁵⁵ This suggests that the boycott campaign in Newry was overall ineffective.

The significant presence of Protestants in Northern Ireland may partially explain the scarce support for the boycott initiative since in several cases, they threatened to start a counter-boycott against local Catholic firms in retaliation.¹⁵⁶ Considering that, even where they were not the majority of the population, they still constituted a sizeable and usually prosperous minority, this likely led to some sort of balance. It is also possible that northern Catholics did not believe that the boycott had any chance of preventing the implementation of partition.

- **The end of the Belfast Boycott**

In December 1921, representatives of the self-established Irish Republic and of the British Government signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, creating the Irish Free State, administered by a Provisional Government under the chairmanship of Michael Collins. Although the agreement established a self-governing dominion with greater autonomy than that previously granted to Southern Ireland in December 1920, it failed to deliver the Irish

¹⁵³ PRONI, HA/5/106 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Strabane), and HA/5/108 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Aughnacloy).

¹⁵⁴ PRONI, HA/5/105 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Newry. Black list).

¹⁵⁵ PRONI, HA/5/105 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Letter from South Down Unionist Association to Dawson Bates, 19 Jan. 1922).

¹⁵⁶ PRONI, COM/62/2/7 (Ulster Trade's Defence Association. Poster).

Republic promised by Sinn Féin. TDs split on the Treaty, which was approved by the Dáil with only 64 votes against 57.¹⁵⁷ The rift between pro and anti-Treaty republicans deepened in the following months.

The Treaty did not settle the Ulster question, and violence in the North, and particularly in Belfast, escalated significantly in early 1922.¹⁵⁸ James Craig, northern Prime Minister, was anxious to clarify the attitude of the Free State towards the Six Counties in order to reassure his unionist supporters, and sought a meeting with Michael Collins.¹⁵⁹ The two met on 21 January 1922, in London, to discuss several issues concerning North-South relations, and finally reached an agreement known as First Craig-Collins Pact. According to its second clause, Collins agreed to end the Belfast boycott, while Craig undertook to facilitate the return of expelled workers to shipyards and firms, subject to a revival of trade.¹⁶⁰

In practice, Craig did not take further action, partly because shipyard workers refused to re-admit Catholics, partly because the post-war recession had started affecting Northern Ireland by then, and employers did not need new labourers. Nevertheless, the Dáil agreed to call off the boycott without having achieved its main goal. The staff of the Department of Belfast Boycott was notified that from 25 February 1922 their services were no longer required.¹⁶¹

The end of the boycott raised disappointment and concern, particularly among northern nationalists and republicans who had not been consulted by Collins. Archbishop MacRory, who had set up the Belfast Committee, immediately expressed anxiety at the suppression of “the most powerful weapon against the Northern parliament”.¹⁶² He lamented that the majority of northern firms had yet to reinstate Catholic workers, but Michael Collins replied that the boycott had been anyway ineffective in that respect.

Most of the complaints about the abolition of the boycott reached the government in March 1922, during a new wave of sectarian violence in Belfast that led to the death of 60

¹⁵⁷ J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 54.

¹⁵⁸ P. Hart, *The IRA at War, 1916-1923* (Oxford, 2003), Table 4 and pp. 72-3.

¹⁵⁹ D. Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf* (Belfast, 1988), p. 71.

¹⁶⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 170-1.

¹⁶¹ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Notice to staff and organisers of the Belfast boycott by Michael Staines, Director of Boycott).

¹⁶² NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Extract from Provisional Government Minutes. Page 44. 30 Jan. 1922).

people.¹⁶³ This culminated in the McMahon Murders, an event that caused outrage throughout Ireland and Britain. On the night of 24 March, armed men entered the house of Owen McMahon, a well-known Belfast publican and friend of Joe Devlin, and killed him together with his three sons and a family friend.¹⁶⁴ The killing was said to be a reprisal for the murder of two policemen on the day before, and took place during curfew. Newspapers gave details of the event under titles such as “Fiendish Midnight Belfast Crime”, “Cannibal Vengeance” and “Carnage in Belfast”.¹⁶⁵ They reported the testimony of one of the survivors claiming that the assaulters wore police uniforms, leading to the conclusion that members of the Specials were responsible for the murders.¹⁶⁶ A secret memo produced by Michael Collins’ intelligence sources pointed to a ‘murder gang’ within the Belfast RIC, also responsible for other crimes against Catholics.¹⁶⁷ No inquiry was conducted into the McMahon murders, and no one was ever prosecuted.

In the Free State, news of sectarian violence in Belfast persuaded some local administrations and associations to demand the re-imposition of the boycott. The Secretary of the Waterford and District Workers’ Council & Labour Party wrote a letter to the Dáil following a meeting of local representatives of the main trade unions (Engineering, Bakers, Carpenters, Irish Nurses, National Union of Rail workers, Plumbers, Irish Women Workers, Irish Union of Shop Assistants, Typographical, Plasterers and others).¹⁶⁸ They demanded the re-imposition of the boycott in response to the recent riots in the North, and added that if the Provisional Government did not take the initiative, they would have to take action themselves. In the same period, the Board of Guardians of Wexford Union called upon Griffith, Collins and de Valera to re-enforce the Belfast boycott “as the only effective means of bringing the bigots of Belfast to their senses, in regard to the treatment they are giving to the Belfast

¹⁶³ G. B. Kenna, *Facts & figures of the Belfast pogrom, 1920-1922* (Dublin, 1922), pp. 114-21.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.121.

¹⁶⁵ *The Freeman’s Journal*, 25 March 1922; *The Irish Independent*, 29 March 1922; *The Ulster Herald*, 1 April 1922.

¹⁶⁶ *The Irish Independent*, 25 March 1922.

¹⁶⁷ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 195-6.

¹⁶⁸ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Letter from Léon Ó Súm to the Secretary of Dáil Éireann, 22 Mar. 1922).

Catholics".¹⁶⁹ Finally, the Loughrea (Galway) Rural District Council, among the first local bodies to adopt the boycott in summer 1920, asked the Dáil to re-impose it.¹⁷⁰

The Provisional Government considered the possibility of re-introducing the Belfast boycott. Dr McNabb, Mr Crummie and Fr. Hasson, members of the Belfast Committee, met the Cabinet on 21 March to inform them about the situation in the North and advise on the question. After a few days of discussion, the cabinet decided not to re-impose the boycott at least until the passage of the Irish Free State Bill through the British House of Lords, but to make arrangements to give the Ulster question greater publicity.¹⁷¹ On 30 March, a Second Craig-Collins Pact was signed. Although it centred on measures to restore peace in the North, where IRA raids and USC abuses constantly threatened civilians, the situation of the expelled workers was dealt with thanks to the British government, which agreed to allocate £500,000 for relief work, one third of which was to benefit Catholics.¹⁷²

Anti-Treaty republicans did not accept the end of the boycott and tried to carry it on. At the IRA Convention held in Dublin on 26 March, they reiterated their allegiance to the Republic and declared the re-imposition of the Belfast boycott.¹⁷³ They established the North East Ulster Boycott Department at the Four Courts Barracks, and chose Commandant Leo Henderson, who had been involved in the organisation of the boycott since summer 1920, as Director of the Department. With his staff, he organised the seizure of Belfast goods, which were in some cases sold on. Irregulars became particularly active in Dublin, where they asked several merchants to pay amounts due to Belfast firms to the Director of the Belfast boycott.¹⁷⁴ The money thus obtained, as well as the proceeds of sales of Belfast goods, were deposited in the Leinster and Munster banks.¹⁷⁵ In one case, they ordered the organisers of an exhibition to withdraw certain pictures painted by artists in the Six County

¹⁶⁹ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Letter from the Local Government Department to An Runai, Dáil Éireann, 31 Mar. 1922).

¹⁷⁰ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Letter from Clerk's Office of Loughrea to the Secretary, Dáil Éireann, 31 Mar. 1922).

¹⁷¹ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Dáil Cabinet Minutes – 21 Mar. 1922 p. 94, 24 Mar. 1922, p. 101).

¹⁷² E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 198-9.

¹⁷³ *The Irish Times*, 27 March 1922.

¹⁷⁴ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Letter to R. J. Kidney, Secretary Merchant Drapers, from the Provisional Government, 6 Apr. 1922).

¹⁷⁵ BMH, statement by Joseph O'Connor, p. 8.

area.¹⁷⁶ Even Mr Jameson, of Messrs J. J. Jameson & Co. Distillers, was asked to pay the amount due to Belfast firms to the Irregulars, but he refused and there were no consequences.¹⁷⁷ The Provisional Government decided not to take any special action in this case, but due to the increasing number of episodes of intimidation by Irregulars, in April '22 they warned Dublin merchants that such demands were illegal and the payment of such monies was a condoning of illegal actions aimed at subverting legal authority.¹⁷⁸ Several firms had already paid under threat, and the government received complaints and claims for compensation.

In rural areas, local groups of anti-Treaty republicans attempted to continue the boycott, generally with little success. They lacked resources and the popular response was less enthusiastic than before. Local authorities were sufficiently in control of the situation to repress attempts to revive the initiative. For example, in April 1922 the *Derry Journal* published an advertisement saying that the boycott campaign against Lisburn, Dromore, Banbridge and Belfast was to be reinforced.¹⁷⁹ The RUC went visiting the *Journal* offices where the Secretary claimed that the advertisement had been handed late at night by an unknown person, and inserted in the paper by the editor, who might have been afraid of omitting it. The newspaper's policy was pro-Treaty, and the Secretary lamented that the previous week all the paper copies had been burnt by anti-Treaty forces once passed the frontier with the Free State.

The split in the Dáil reflected on the IRA, which broke up into pro and anti-Treaty forces, the latter also called Irregulars. After the two forces manoeuvred to seize military positions for months, civil war finally broke out at the end of June 1922. It then became difficult for anti-Treatyites to continue their campaign, and the Belfast boycott was gradually abandoned.

¹⁷⁶ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Extract from Provisional Government Minutes. 5 Apr. 1922. item 7).

¹⁷⁷ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Extract from Provisional Government Minutes. 15 May 1922. Item 8).

¹⁷⁸ NAI, TSCH/3/S1095 (Belfast Boycott, Jan. 1922-Oct. 1923. Correspondence between R. J. Kidney, Secretary Merchant Drapers, and the Secretary of the Provisional Government, Apr. 1922).

¹⁷⁹ PRONI, HA/5/1489 (Boycott of Belfast goods, Derry journal published notice).

- **Long term consequences of the Belfast Boycott**

It is hard to estimate the degree of success of the Belfast boycott. Statistical data about cross-border trade are available only for the period after 1923. Since the northern textile and shipbuilding industries had little trade with the rest of Ireland, it is unlikely that they were affected.¹⁸⁰ It is somewhat easier to speculate about its effects on northern banks. They were not threatened in their solvency, but they had to close many of their sub-branches in the South by 1922. However, different factors contributed to this, such as the difficulty of staple industry in the North and the deposit of southern farmers' wartime profits into southern banks.¹⁸¹ Moreover, it is likely that after partition many southerners transferred their accounts from "foreign" banks to national ones, without actively pursuing the Belfast boycott.

Most scholars agree that the boycott was overall counterproductive, since it fostered divisions between North and South and between nationalists and unionists.¹⁸² This was also the opinion of P. S. O'Hegarty, pro-Treaty TD, who firmly believed that Northern Ireland could not be forced into a union with the Free State, but had to join voluntarily.¹⁸³ As early as in 1924, he stated that the boycott

raised up in the South what had never been there, a hatred of the North, and a feeling that the North was as much an enemy of Ireland as was England. It probably inflicted some damage on the Ulster majority, but it was an utter failure inasmuch as it did not secure reinstatement of a single expelled nationalist, nor the conversion of a single unionist. (...) it was merely a blind and suicidal contribution to the general hate.¹⁸⁴

It must be remembered that O'Hegarty was quite bitter about the revolutionary period in 1924.¹⁸⁵ Veterans who had been involved in the boycott implementation generally agreed

¹⁸⁰ A. C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), p. 221.

¹⁸¹ D. S. Johnson, 'The Belfast Boycott' in J. M. Goldstrom and L. A. Clarkson (eds), *Irish Population, Economy and Society* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 298-9.

¹⁸² B. A. Follis, *A State under Siege* (Oxford, 1995), p. 187; M. Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 231-2.

¹⁸³ T. Garvin, 'O'Hegarty, Patrick Sarsfield ('P. S.')', *DIB*.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

¹⁸⁵ R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces* (London, 2014), p. 307.

on its positive achievements, as they declared to the staff of the Bureau of Military History when interviewed between 1947 and 1957. It is important to notice that very few unionists and constitutional nationalists were interviewed by the staff of the Bureau of Military History, and this inevitably reflects on the tone of the statements mentioning the boycott.¹⁸⁶

John McCoy, IRA Commandant in Armagh, enthusiastically stated that the boycott was the most effective weapon against the British in Ireland, since it forced blacklisted unionist traders to pay fines and stop selling Belfast goods. McCoy argued that “the bargaining effect of this weapon when dealing with the Northern Unionist interests was enormous and could only be appreciated by the people living on the spot in Northern Ireland”.¹⁸⁷ Patrick Moylett, a Volunteer and Sinn Féin Courts Justice, firmly believed that the boycott had helped to consolidate the country, while Liam Gaynor, Belfast-born member of the IRB, regretted that the initiative’s economic pressure on the British was ended by Collins.¹⁸⁸ It is likely that these men were reluctant to depict a campaign they helped to enforce as an overall failure. Moreover, they lived in the Free State when they were interviewed, and did not experience the consequences of partition in their everyday life.

Only two veterans lived in Northern Ireland when interviewed about the boycott. Patrick Beagan, IRA Lieutenant, asserted that boycott activities had a “heartening effect on the morale of our men” in Armagh, where major military operations were prevented by the massive presence of armed unionists. Beagan approved the boycott from a military point of view, but did not mention its impact on the political situation in Ireland.¹⁸⁹ In contradistinction, David McGuinness, Assistant Intelligence Officer of the 3rd IRA Northern Division, claimed that the boycott “did more than anything else to bring the Northern Authorities to their senses, while the effect produced in America, on the Continent and in the Dominions by the bulletins issued by the Dáil Publicity Department finally brought about a cessation of mob attacks”.¹⁹⁰ It would be reasonable to expect a less positive evaluation of the boycott from a northern republican. The difference between Beagan and McGuinness might be due to the fact that McGuinness worked with Frank Crummey, one of the

¹⁸⁶ F. McGarry, *Rebels* (2011, London), p. xv.

¹⁸⁷ BMH, statement by John McCoy, p. 121.

¹⁸⁸ BMH, statements by Patrick Moylett, p. 22, and Liam Gaynor, p. 20.

¹⁸⁹ BMH, statement by Patrick Beagan, p. 2.

¹⁹⁰ BMH, statement by David McGuinness, p. 18.

organisers of the Belfast Boycott Committee, and his task was the recruitment and training of dockers, railway men and carters who helped stop boycotted goods. His important role in the boycott organisation as Intelligence Officer goes far in explaining his reluctance in admitting the failure of the campaign.

- **Conclusion**

The majority of northern Catholics turned from constitutional nationalism to republicanism because the latter seemed more likely to prevent partition. They saw themselves as part of the same national community that constituted the majority of the population in the South, and they felt represented by the Sinn Féin government in Dublin. Therefore, they expected political support and popular solidarity with their cause from the South. They considered the organisation of the boycott as a duty of the Sinn Féin government towards loyal citizens of the Irish republic who found themselves on the wrong side of the border.

Southern local councils setting up a boycott immediately after the expulsions of workers, and trade unions demanding the re-introduction of the boycott after the McMahon murders, are examples of sections of southern population that felt some solidarity towards northern Catholics. In the first case, local councils acted independently of the Sinn Féin leadership in Dublin, while in the second, trade unions openly opposed the Provisional government. These initiatives were spontaneous and emotional responses to sectarian violence in the North, and did not necessarily imply a long-term commitment to the protection of the northern minority by those who undertook them.

The Sinn Féin leadership did not have a consistent attitude towards the boycott because they did not have a clear Ulster policy. Divisions emerged since the early stage of the boycott discussion and it is significant that the strongest opposition to the project came from Ernest Blythe, an Ulsterman and a Protestant. When interviewed by the staff of the Bureau of Military History, he regretted the Cabinet's approval of the boycott campaign, and attributed it to the fact that Griffith "was as completely ignorant of Northern conditions as

the ordinary average Southerner who has never spent any time in the north-eastern area".¹⁹¹

In the first Dáil debate on the boycott, most TDs opposed it so as not to foment any idea of political or cultural difference between the North and the rest of Ireland. In January 1921, the Dáil officially sanctioned the Belfast boycott because they believed, or claimed to believe, that partition was still reversible. Instead of denying any difference justifying the division of Ulster from the rest of Ireland, they had to acknowledge this separation in an attempt to prove the dependence of the northern economy upon the rest of the island. It is significant that, after the first Craig-Collins pact, republican leaders promptly called off the boycott, and refused to re-introduce it despite the missed reinstatement of Catholic workers and no progress on the partition question. This suggests that the Sinn Féin leadership was not strongly committed to the protection of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, and that this issue was subordinated to a political agenda privileging the consolidation of the southern state.

¹⁹¹ BMH, statement by Ernest Blythe, p. 120.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BOUNDARY COMMISSION

- **Historiography**

The Boundary Commission marks a turning point in Irish history. Its provisions, implementation and failure had a major impact on the internal dynamics of northern nationalism, on the decline of the pro-Treaty side and rise of de Valera in the Free State, as well as on North-South relations. The Commission, envisaged by the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, was only established in 1924, while its report, although completed in late 1925, was published in 1969 with an introduction by Geoffrey J. Hand, a distant cousin of the Free State representative in the Commission Eoin MacNeill.¹ Hand summarizes the history of the Boundary Commission from the Home Rule negotiations through an analysis of political and diplomatic aspects of its implementation. In particular, he describes how MacNeill and the chairman, Mr Justice Richard Feetham, interpreted the vague terms providing the Commission's establishment.

The latter issue remains central to the debate on the Boundary Commission, recurring in subsequent works such as *The Scholar Revolutionary*, the first monograph on Eoin MacNeill published in 1973. Hand here contributed a chapter consisting of a close examination of MacNeill's correspondence. After discussing the circumstances of his cousin's appointment, Hand concludes that it was inappropriate for a number of reasons ranging from his ministerial position (being Minister of Education in the Free State, he had less time for the Commission than his colleagues) to his weak tactical skills (he was a better scholar than politician). As for the report itself, Hand attributes the failure of the Commission to the ambiguity of article 12, although he admits that MacNeill's passivity contributed to the misunderstanding between him and Feetham.

More recently, Kieran J. Rankin has written a number of articles on the Boundary Commission, approaching the question from a political geographer's perspective.² His work

¹ G. J. Hand (ed.), *Report of the Irish Boundary Commission, 1925* (Shannon, 1969).

² K. J. Rankin, 'Deducing rationales and political tactics in the partitioning of Ireland, 1912-1925', *Political Geography*, Vol. 26, No. 8, (Nov. 2007), pp. 909-33; 'The Provenance and Dissolution of the Irish Boundary Commission', *Working Papers in British-Irish Studies*, No. 79, (2006), pp. 1-34; 'The search for statutory Ulster',

offers a close analysis of the arguments that led to the final delimitation of the boundary line envisaged by the Government of Ireland Act. Rankin also gives an account of the actual work of the Commission and of the material and sources on which the final verdict was based. In particular, he explains the rationale behind Feetham's choice to select the district electoral divisions as the appropriate territorial framework and the 1911 census as the main source to ascertain the wishes of the inhabitants. In conclusion, Rankin argues that since the Boundary Commission was subject to the approval of the governments represented in it, politics prevailed over any other consideration.

The main comprehensive study of the subject is Paul Murray's *The Irish Boundary Commission and its Origins, 1886-1925*, providing a detailed analysis of the interests of the different parties at play.³ Like Hand, Murray pays particular attention to their conflicting interpretations of the Commission's provisions derived from its vague terms. Moreover, Murray highlights how ideological divisions among northern nationalists impacted on the activities in preparation for the Commission's hearings. Although he concentrates on high politics, he devotes some attention to the grass-roots level by considering the evidence produced in support of boundary revision by inhabitants of border areas.

Activities in preparation for the Commission's hearings (organization of meetings, selection of witnesses), and the documentation produced to argue the nationalist case for transfer of areas from Northern Ireland to the Free State, have not been the object of any systematic study. It may be due to the common, and likely correct, assumption that this material had little or no influence on the Commission's final deliberations. Murray appreciates the importance of these documents in providing information about the consequences of partition on everyday life along the border. However, he does not consider these sources' fundamental contribution to an understanding of northern Catholics' responses to the prospect of boundary adjustment. Catholics' attitudes resulted from the interaction of different factors, such as hostility between nationalists and republicans, proximity to the

History Ireland, Vol. 17, No. 3, (May - Jun., 2009), pp. 28-32; 'The role of the Irish Boundary Commission in the entrenchment of the Irish border: From tactical panacea to political liability', *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 34, No. 3, (2008), pp. 422-47.

³ P. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its origins, 1886-1925* (Dublin, 2011).

border, the zeal of local agents in charge of the preparation of evidence, the practical inconvenience and economic disadvantages of the custom barrier.

The analysis contained in this chapter allows to understand the motivations behind northern Catholics' active involvement into politics during a time of crisis in traditional representative democracy. The sectarian attitude of unionist authorities and the abstentionist policy adopted by nationalist representatives served to undermine Catholics' possibility of exercising their political rights through voting. Activities in preparation for the Boundary Commission constituted an accessible form of political participation for a significant section of northern nationalists. Their study challenges the widespread assumption that the Catholic population was overall apathetic and alienated from politics.

- **The negotiations on the Anglo-Irish Treaty**

In order to understand how the Boundary Commission was couched in vague terms, which were nonetheless accepted by the Irish delegates, it is necessary to look at the Treaty negotiations. By the time these started in London, following the July 1921 truce between IRA and Crown forces, the state of Northern Ireland was a functioning political and administrative unit separate from the rest of the island. Its existence constituted a de facto partition, and its newly elected Prime Minister, James Craig, was confident that the status and territory of Northern Ireland were untouchable, as he stated just after the truce: "it now merely remains for Mr de Valera and the British people to come to terms regarding the area outside that of which I am Prime Minister".⁴

To northern unionists the Government of Ireland Act appeared as a final settlement. They refused to go to London and relied on British representatives to defend their interests at the negotiation table, since they knew that unionists' support was essential to David Lloyd George's coalition government. The British Prime Minister, however, tried to persuade Craig to accept an all-Ireland parliament by assuring him that the Belfast government would maintain its powers, so that North and South could establish friendly relations without partitioning the country. Craig firmly rejected the proposal, leaving the British with no

⁴ *The Times*, 19 July 1921.

choice but to support unionists.⁵ After all, even if they were ready to grant some degree of self-government to Ireland in order to settle the question, the British could not force a significant section of loyal citizens out of the United Kingdom against their will.

Despite the strength of unionists' position, when the Irish delegation sat at the negotiating table they claimed to represent all Ireland as the self-established republic comprised 32 counties, including those six that comprised Northern Ireland. Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins, leaders of the delegation, both sat for northern constituencies: the former for Tyrone North-West, and the latter for Armagh. They argued that the boundary was inadequate and unfair since more than 400,000 Catholics were included in Northern Ireland against their will, and with the irregular distribution of the population, they were undoubtedly in a majority in several areas. In Fermanagh, Catholic inhabitants numbered 34,740, Protestants 27,096; in Tyrone, there were 79,015 Catholics and 63,650 Protestants. In Tyrone, only the South parliamentary division presented a slight Protestant majority (51.3%).⁶ Other areas with strong Catholic majorities were Derry Borough (22,923 Catholics and 17,857 Protestants) and South Armagh, where nationalist candidates had steadily held power since the creation of the constituency in 1885.⁷

This situation had fostered antagonism between Ulster unionists and nationalists during the negotiations for the third Home Rule bill. The nationalist leader John Redmond had argued against the inclusion of the Fermanagh and Tyrone in Northern Ireland in a detailed memorandum. He demonstrated that, according to the 1911 Census of Ireland, Fermanagh and Tyrone had the same proportional Catholic majorities that Protestants had in Londonderry and Armagh, where the combined Catholic minority was greater than the combined Protestant minority in Fermanagh and Tyrone.⁸ Even British conservatives and unionists were initially opposed to the six counties option, since they found that exclusion of the whole Ulster province was more logical and likely to be accepted by the parliament.⁹ However, unionists opposed a nine-county partition that, by including Catholics from Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan, would have reduced their majority to only 200,000

⁵ M. Laffan, *The Partition of Ireland, 1911-1925* (Dublin, 1983), p. 84

⁶ D. Gwyn, *The History of Partition, 1912-1925* (Dublin, 1950), pp. 122-3.

⁷ B. Walker, *Parliamentary election results in Ireland, 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1978).

⁸ K. J. Rankin, "The search for statutory Ulster", *History Ireland*, Vol. 17, No. 3, (May-Jun., 2009), p. 31.

⁹ D. G. Boyce, 'British Conservative Opinion, the Ulster Question, and the Partition of Ireland, 1912-21', *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 65, (Mar., 1970), p. 100.

inhabitants.¹⁰ It would have been more difficult for Craig to maintain control of an area where almost half of the population was nationalist. The British finally agreed on the six counties framework to meet the demands of Ulster unionists, but were conscious of the weakness of their claim to Tyrone and Fermanagh.

The Irish delegation tried to exploit this weakness and, although they did not rely on the British to coerce unionists, they hoped for concessions over the status and territory of the northern state. After all, Northern Ireland had been in existence only for a few months, and the six counties composing it had never before constituted any form of political or even cultural entity distinct from the rest of Ulster. At the time, the region was not even referred to as “Northern Ireland”, but normally as “Ulster” by unionists, and alternatively as “Six Counties” or “North-East Ulster” by nationalists. Its permanent exclusion from a self-governing Ireland was not as secure as it may seem in retrospective.

However, the Irish did not know how to confront unionist opposition to a united Ireland, and they had not formulated any concrete proposals alternative to partition.¹¹ The only instructions the delegation had received from Eamon de Valera was to use Ulster as a tactical device, and to break off negotiations on the partition question in case there was something in the proposed settlement that they could not accede to.¹² De Valera knew that the British were very unlikely to concede much in terms of status and the imperial link, and that if the Irish rejected their offers, it would have been hard to justify it at international level. A rejection of British offers contemplating the partition of Ireland, however, could gain them international sympathy.¹³

On the other hand, Lloyd George knew that public opinion in Britain would not accept a compromise over the Crown and the Empire, but was ready to give up Ulster in order to settle the Irish question.¹⁴ In particular, if the negotiators reached an agreement on these issues, as well as on economic matters and defence, but not on Ulster, British people would have not supported their government breaking down negotiations and renewing the war.

¹⁰ D. Gwyn, *The History of Partition, 1912-1925* (Dublin, 1950), p. 122.

¹¹ P. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its origins, 1886-1925* (Dublin, 2011), p. 71.

¹² NAI, DE/1/3 (Minutes of Dáil Éireann Ministry and Cabinet, 13 Nov. 1921).

¹³ F. Pakenham, ‘The Treaty negotiations’, in D. Williams (ed.), *The Irish Struggle* (London, 1966), pp. 109-110.

¹⁴ D. G. Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish Troubles* (London, 1972), p. 155.

But Lloyd George could not coerce Ulster unionists, and struggled to avoid a break on that question.

From the start of the negotiations, the discussion focused on the future relation of the Irish state with the United Kingdom, rather than on the Ulster question. Irish recognition of the British Crown was the sticking point for both sides, as well as Ireland's membership of the Empire. The two parties could not easily find a compromise and negotiations reached an impasse. In accordance to their strategy, the Irish offered full acceptance of the British Crown in exchange for essential unity.¹⁵ This offer was very tempting for the British, who undertook to persuade James Craig to accept some form of Irish unity with safeguards for Northern Ireland. At Craig's refusal, Lloyd George tried a new way to break the impasse over Ulster. On 8 November 1921, Thomas Jones, Lloyd George's secretary, approached the Irish delegation with a new proposal: in case the Belfast parliament voted itself out of the future Irish Free State, a Boundary Commission would redraw the border between north and south of Ireland.¹⁶ A few days later, Arthur Griffith signed a declaration saying:

If Ulster did not see her way to accept immediately the principle of a Parliament of all Ireland (...) it would be necessary to revise the boundary of Northern Ireland. This might be done by a Boundary Commission which would be dictated to adjust the line both by inclusion and exclusion so as to make the boundary as close as possible to the wishes of the population.¹⁷

Lloyd George succeeded in securing Griffith's support. The latter was persuaded that such a solution was convenient since, as he assured de Valera, the Commission would transfer generous portions of Fermanagh and Tyrone, plus parts of Armagh, Down and Londonderry to the Free State.¹⁸ This meant that more than one third of the territory of Northern Ireland would have been transferred, and likely the remnant would have not survived long parted from the rest of the island. Griffith was confident that a Boundary Commission could bring about essential unity, and the rest of the delegation did not oppose the proposal, although not all the delegates were enthusiastic about it.

¹⁵ T. Jones, *Whitehall Diary* (3 vols., London, 1971), ii, p. 145.

¹⁶ F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (Glasgow, 1971), p. 433.

¹⁷ F. Pakenham, *Peace by Ordeal* (London, 1935), pp. 177-8.

¹⁸ P. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its origins, 1886-1925* (Dublin, 2011), p. 85.

On 5 December, after the issues of Crown and Empire were settled, the Irish delegation and representatives of the British government signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Northern Ireland was excluded from the jurisdiction of the Dublin government for one month from the signing of the Treaty, after which the Belfast parliament was given the chance to address the King asking to be excluded from the Free State, or be part of it.¹⁹ In case Belfast chose the first option, as expected, article 12 made provisions for the establishment of the Boundary Commission:

Provided that if such an address [exercising Northern Ireland's right to opt out of the Irish Free State] is so presented, a Commission consisting of three persons, one to be appointed by the Government of the Irish Free State, one to be appointed by the Government of Northern Ireland, and one who shall be Chairman to be appointed by the British Government shall determine in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions the boundaries between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland, and for the purposes of the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, and of this instrument, the boundary of Northern Ireland shall be such as may be determined by such Commission.²⁰

As evident, article 12 presents some differences compared to the proposal signed by Griffith. In the final version, the criteria determining the transfer of territory were not only the wishes of the inhabitants, but also economic and geographic conditions. These conditions were not specified, and could easily become subject to arbitrary the decisions of the commissioners.²¹ For example, it was not clear who were the inhabitants whose wishes were to be taken into account, nor what criteria should determine the compatibility of people's will with economic and geographic conditions.²² This seemed to be against the Irish, since two out of three commissioners were likely to privilege unionists' interests. Article 12 left the Irish in a position of disadvantage, and it is undeniable that the delegates showed naivety in their acceptance of such vague terms. However, it is certain that they did not see the Treaty they signed as the ultimate endorsement of permanent partition. Their

¹⁹ N. Mansergh, *The Government of Northern Ireland* (London, 1936), p. 120.

²⁰ NAI, 2002/5/1 (Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland signed 6th December 1921 at London, p. 4).

²¹ O. MacDonagh, *Ireland: the Union and its aftermath* (London, 1977), p. 100.

²² J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 141.

lack of alternative proposals to resolve the Ulster question facilitated their acceptance of the Boundary Commission as a means to defer the final settlement of the question.

- **Reactions to article 12**

On 9 December, Lloyd George assured Craig that the Boundary Commission was only meant to transfer a few southern unionists in border areas to Northern Ireland, and to move south an equivalent number of northern nationalists.²³ According to the British Prime Minister, the Commission was not going to transfer big portions of territory but merely to re-adjust the boundary line. However, one week after the signing of the Treaty, Lloyd George made a strong statement endorsing the transfer of Fermanagh and Tyrone to the Free State:

Take it either by constituency or by Poor Law Union, or, if you like, by counting heads, and you will find that the majority in these counties prefer to be with their Southern neighbours – What does this mean? If Ulster is to remain a separate community, you can only by means of coercion keep them there, and although I am against the coercion of Ulster, I do not believe in Ulster coercing other units.²⁴

Another British signatory of the Treaty, Lord Birkenhead, Lord High Chancellor, spoke in favour of boundary rectification:

We do not propose to interfere with the arrangement of a year ago in relation to the counties, but we propose that a Boundary Commission shall examine into the boundary line with a view to rendering impossible such an unhappy incident as that of a few days ago in which the popularly elected bodies of one or two of these districts [Tyrone] were excluded from their habitations from representatives of the Northern Parliament on the ground that they were not discharging their duties properly. I am making no criticism, but such a system cannot be consistent with the maintenance of order. That boundary must be rectified.²⁵

Endorsement of boundary rectification caused outrage among Ulster unionists who accused the British government of betrayal: they blamed clause 12 on “British perfidy”, and the toast

²³ B. A. Follis, *A State under Siege* (Oxford, 1995), p. 72.

²⁴ Hansard, 14 December 1921, vol 149 cc39-40.

²⁵ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 10 December 1921. When he mentioned a few Tyrone districts, Lord Birkenhead was referring to the seizure of the County Council’s offices in Omagh by the RIC, after the board had declared allegiance to the Dáil, *The Ulster Herald*, 10 December 1921.

of the King was no longer given at gatherings.²⁶ Craig tried to reassure his party by asserting that the Treaty was not binding on Northern Ireland since the state had no representatives at the negotiating table in London, and publicly reiterated his opposition to any boundary adjustment. However, it appears that unionists' faith in Lloyd George was lost. Although at the time no party took action to set-up the Commission, its provision in the Treaty increased the sense of existential insecurity of Ulster unionists, who reacted by strengthening the government and administration of Northern Ireland.

In Southern Ireland, little attention was paid to the situation in the North. When the Dáil discussed the Treaty, the Oath of allegiance and association to the Empire proved to be the most controversial issues, whereas there was little debate over Ulster and the Commission. Only nine of the 338 published pages of the Treaty debates dealt with partition, and most of the speeches were delivered by the three TDs from county Monaghan (Sean MacEntee, Ernest Blythe and Eoin O'Duffy).²⁷ In his address, MacEntee, member of the Belfast Boycott Committee, claimed that the Boundary Commission would bring only a slight adjustment of the border, as Lloyd George had assured Craig. Northern Ireland would become "a fortress of Orangeism and Unionism that will hold Ireland for England as surely as Gibraltar holds the Mediterranean for them".²⁸ Despite the fact that MacEntee represented county Monaghan, when he urged the Dáil to reject the Treaty he asked the deputies to save his fellow Belfast citizens, thus reiterating northern Catholics' right to southern support. Unlike most of his colleagues who rejected the settlement because it did not establish a republic, it was MacEntee's genuine concern for the future of the northern minority that made him vote against the Treaty.

Blythe, and O'Duffy, MacEntee's Monaghan colleagues, both endorsed the Treaty. Blythe, an Ulster Protestant, had been involved in the boycott's organisation as Minister for Trade, despite initial opposition. In his intervention during the Treaty debate, he paid little attention to partition. He merely stated that unionists would soon be persuaded, by a suitable propaganda and by the material need for union with the South to join the Free State, and he encouraged his colleagues to accept partition as a temporary settlement.²⁹ It

²⁶ *Morning Post*, 11 December 1921.

²⁷ D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 245.

²⁸ Dáil Éireann Debates, 16 December 1921, Vol. T, No. 4. Prelude.

²⁹ Dáil Éireann Debates, 3 Jan. 1922, Vol. T, No. 10. Debate on Treaty.

appears that Blythe expected Ulster unionists to become aware of the obvious advantages of Irish unity, and that southerners should only encourage this natural process with adequate propaganda.

Eoin O'Duffy, ex-commandant of the IRA brigade in his native Monaghan, exposed the futility of a few TDs' claim that the plenipotentiaries had betrayed the North: "the people of Ulster will understand at once that such idle statements as those, not followed by acts, will bring them no farther".³⁰ He provocatively encouraged anybody with a policy on Ulster to rise and speak in the Dáil, thus exposing the lack of alternative proposals to end partition. Blythe and O'Duffy clearly expressed the general feeling that the Ulster question, although still not satisfactorily settled, should not prevent southerners from seizing the opportunity to reach an agreement with Britain. This was particularly true in view of the lack of alternative proposals for the North. Even "Document No. 2", an alternative to the Treaty produced by de Valera, did not present any change in the Ulster provisions in comparison with what agreed in London.³¹ When the Dáil finally voted, most of the deputies representing northern constituencies approved the Treaty.

The national press in the South generally welcomed the Treaty and its Ulster provisions. The unionist *Irish Times* stated that "at last the foundations of Irish unity have been laid", confident that Ulster would eventually join the Free State because its taxation was likely to be lower than Imperial taxation.³² Nationalist newspapers enthusiastically welcomed the Treaty, and devoted more attention to unionists' reactions than to the northern provisions. The *Freeman's Journal* claimed that "the greatest battle of all" was fought over the questions of national unity and allegiance.³³ Although the paper widely reported on the situation in the North, it did not comment on the Ulster provisions. The *Irish Independent*, which published several "rancorous" articles by northern unionist papers, described Armagh and Down nationalists as "jubilant" and proud of their representatives, Collins and de Valera respectively.³⁴ All newspapers reported Lord Birkenhead's speech, and it seems that they

³⁰ Dáil Éireann Debates, 4 Jan. 1922, Vol. T, No. 11. Debate on Treaty.

³¹ M. Wall, 'Partition: the Ulster question (1916-1926)', in T. D. Williams (ed.), *The Irish Struggle, 1916-1926* (London, 1966), p. 87.

³² *The Irish Times*, 7 December 1921.

³³ *The Freeman's Journal*, 7 December 1921.

³⁴ *The Irish Independent*, 8 December 1921.

considered it as a guarantee that the Boundary Commission would eventually right the wrongs of partition.

Reception of the Treaty in the northern nationalist press appeared overall positive and characterised by expectation. The *Ulster Herald* titled “Victory!”, and triumphantly announced that Ireland had entered “the path of freedom”.³⁵ The *Anglo-Celt* envisaged favourable border adjustments according to the wishes of the inhabitants, and did not mention economic and geographic conditions.³⁶ The *Derry People and Donegal News* rejoiced in the power conferred to Dublin, much greater than that of Belfast, and stressed the importance of Sinn Féin re-winning the Derry City Council at the forthcoming elections, which would make the case for transfer of Derry to the Free State very strong before the Boundary Commission.³⁷

Optimism about the future of the Free State and the Boundary Commission appeared to motivate the choice of Cookstown (Tyrone) Board of Guardians that gave allegiance to the Dáil believing that they would pay less rates than under the Belfast parliament, which had to bear the expense of Imperial contribution. By rejecting Belfast’s authority they expected their transfer to the Free State to be more likely.³⁸ Cookstown thus joined a number of nationalist local bodies that, between November and December, had refused to recognise the Belfast government at the urging of the Dáil Minister for Local Government, William Cosgrave, hoping to show that there was strong opposition to partition at the time of the London negotiations.³⁹

On 7 December, in the aftermath of the Treaty signing, a group of northern nationalists representing Sinn Féin and the Nationalist Party met the Dáil speaker and Derry TD, Eoin MacNeill. He assured them that partition was only a temporary settlement of the Ulster question, and encouraged them to strengthen the policy of non-recognition of the Belfast parliament by rejecting taxes, as well as the educational and judicial authority of the Northern Ireland state. He assured them that northern Catholics were “entitled to look to

³⁵ *The Ulster Herald*, 10 December 1921.

³⁶ *The Anglo-Celt*, 10 December 1921.

³⁷ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 10 December 1921.

³⁸ *The Fermanagh Herald*, 17 December 1921.

³⁹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 152.

the nation for support” in their struggle.⁴⁰ The fact that MacNeill was an Ulster Catholic from the glens of Antrim might have encouraged the delegation to trust him and agree on the non-recognition policy. However, whereas Tyrone and Fermanagh representatives seemed confident that the Boundary Commission would transfer the two counties south, other delegates were more sceptical. The Mayor of Derry, Hugh O’Doherty, complained about the lack of guarantees for the northern minority under the Belfast regime, and did not seem optimistic about the transfer of his town to the Free State, despite its proximity to the border and unquestionable Catholic majority.⁴¹

Although the southern press only reported positive reactions to the Treaty, O’Doherty was not the only one in the North who looked at the future with anxiety. Whereas papers from border areas welcomed the Treaty with enthusiasm, the Belfast-based *Irish News*, close to Joe Devlin, expressed concern over the fate of those Catholics that would be left in Northern Ireland after the transfer of territory decided by the Boundary Commission.⁴² The Ulster provisions in the Treaty caused uncertainty and anxiety outside the north-east corner too. For example, the Very Rev. Archdeacon Tierney, a Sinn Féin supporter from Enniskillen, expressed satisfaction at the end of violence, but invited northern nationalists to adopt “a very cautious attitude” towards the Treaty, since their future in the Free State was uncertain.⁴³ A few days later, at a meeting of Lisnaskea (Fermanagh) Rural Council, considering a malicious injury claim, one of the councillors, Mr Hanna, opposed the proceedings, claiming that the solicitors had no right to bring cases into an English court as long as Ireland’s situation was not settled and they did not know where they stood. Despite the opposition of his colleagues, he insisted they were in the Free State until the Belfast parliament voted itself out, and refused to take part in the injury claim proceedings.⁴⁴

Father O’Neill from Eglinton (Derry) brought attention to the vague formulation of article 12, and wrote a bitter letter to the *Derry People*, asking for a clear statement from the plenipotentiaries about the Boundary Commission. He complained that the powers of the commissioners were not well defined, and that the Commission would have a British

⁴⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 156-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴² *The Irish News*, 9 December 1921.

⁴³ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 17 December 1921.

⁴⁴ *The Fermanagh Herald*, 24 December 1921.

majority. He retained no hope of Dublin supporting northern Catholics because the South lacked the strength to oppose the Belfast government, which had the assistance of the Empire. He concluded by stating that northern Catholics were “sick of hearing even from our friends that there will be no coercion of Ulster”.⁴⁵ In his opinion, the only guarantee that the nationalist minority needed was transfer to the Free State.

There was little mention of national unity in the northern press. Papers tended to assume a partitionist perspective focusing on the prospect of border adjustment and, in the case of the *Irish News*, on its consequences for Catholics remaining in Northern Ireland. The enthusiasm with which most of the press welcomed the Treaty may suggest that the majority of Catholic public opinion in the North considered the settlement as a step in the right direction, and trusted the plenipotentiaries. However, it is possible, given that the Treaty had already been signed, and even those who opposed it did not have alternative solutions to the Ulster question, that many northern Catholics chose to make the best of a bad bargain, hoping that the redress of their grievances was only postponed. Although border Catholics had more reasons to be optimistic than those from the north-east, geography did not necessarily determine their response to the Treaty, as the case of Derry shows. Republicans obviously trusted the plenipotentiaries much more than Devlin and his followers, and this reflected on the different perceptions of the Treaty.

Finally, the Dáil approved the Treaty on 7 January 1922. Hostility between pro and anti-Treaty republicans continued to increase until the breakout of civil war in June 1922. The Treaty split in the Free State did not provoke deep divisions among northern republicans, and the Catholic minority generally endorsed the agreement.

- **Inconsistencies and delays in the Free State’s Ulster policy**

As expected, within one month of the signing of the Treaty, the Parliament of Northern Ireland made an address to the King to exercise its right to opt out of the Free State. This implied that, as stated in article 12, preparations for the establishment of the Boundary Commission should begin. The northern Prime Minister made it clear that his party was not

⁴⁵ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 31 December 1921.

going to be involved, and dismissed the Commission as the result of a bargain made behind unionists' backs by Dublin and London.⁴⁶ Contrary to northern Catholics' expectations, the Irish government did not seem anxious to have the Commission established. The Civil War tended to monopolise its attention, although Michael Collins did find the time to meet with James Craig three times between January and March 1922. Although in their first meeting the two leaders seemed to agree to put aside the Boundary Commission and negotiate an agreement between the two governments, it soon became clear that Craig and Collins had rather different views of border revision. Whereas their second meeting broke down, the third one produced a shared agreement dealing with a number of issues, particularly the release of prisoners in the North, but failed to address the boundary question.⁴⁷

The official justification for the delay in the implementation of the Commission was the necessity to wait for the main parties to complete their preliminary preparations, as stated by Patrick Hogan, Sinn Féin pro-Treaty representative for Galway.⁴⁸ At the time, Hogan was member of a committee established by the Irish Cabinet in order to review the Free State's Ulster policy. The President of the Committee was Ernest Blythe, Monaghan TD and, from late August, Minister for Local Government. Blythe, who as we have seen in the previous chapter was very sceptical of the Belfast boycott, opposed the non-recognition policy endorsed by the Sinn Féin leadership on the basis that it had failed in improving the situation of the minority. He believed that peaceful relations with unionists in the North were the only way to secure better treatment for Catholics, ultimately contributing to advance the prospect of reunification.

The memorandum produced by the Committee recommended encouragement of "all those within the Six Counties who look to us for guidance to acknowledge its [of the Northern government] authority and refrain from any attempt to prevent it working. (...) Catholic members of the Northern parliament who have no personal objection to the oath of allegiance should be urged to take their seats".⁴⁹ The Blythe memorandum was circulated to all ministers at the start of August 1922, around the same time as the Provisional Government received a report from Captain E. L. Macnaghten, an Ulster Protestant

⁴⁶ *The Anglo-Celt*, 16 December 1922.

⁴⁷ P. Hart, *Mick* (London, 2005), pp. 367-8, 383.

⁴⁸ Dáil Éireann Debate, 17 Jan. 1923, Vol. 2 No. 18. Ceisteanna – Questions – Boundary Commission.

⁴⁹ R. Fanning, *Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 1983), p. 35.

nationalist close to Michael Collins. Macnaghten reported a meeting with a number of northern businessmen supporting Devlin's party. They were in favour of recognising the Belfast parliament and wanted elected nationalist representatives to take their seats and denounce the abuses inflicted upon Catholics.⁵⁰ Although they maintained that a united Ireland was their ultimate goal, they considered the establishment of peaceful relations as a necessary step towards that end.

Blythe's memorandum and Macnaghten's report encouraged the Free State government to reconsider its position concerning the Ulster question, and on 19 August 1922, the cabinet chose to adopt a "peace policy" towards the North.⁵¹ At this stage, it appears that the Free State government was willing to accept some degree of responsibility towards the minority, and finally implement a consistent long-term policy aimed at achieving unification without overlooking the present condition of northern Catholics. This would have been facilitated by the support of those nationalists in the Six Counties who believed that, since the end of partition was not in sight, they should enter politics. These nationalists did not reject Dublin's help, but believed that their true representatives, those who had the power and duty to defend them, were northern MPs elected to the Belfast parliament, which was the appropriate place to argue their case.

The death of Michael Collins on 22 August changed the situation again. Since before his involvement in the Treaty negotiations, Collins had been preoccupied with the situation in the North and was personally in touch with northern republicans. Despite his acceptance of the Treaty terms, he did not consider partition as an accomplished fact, and in the first months of 1922, he secretly promoted an unsuccessful IRA offensive in the North.⁵² In the meantime, he signed two pacts with James Craig aimed at stabilising the situation and improving north-south relations, which implicitly recognised the authority of the Belfast government.

Collins' northern policy embodied the contradictions of the republican approach to the Ulster question, but although it did not succeed in benefiting the Catholic minority, it kept the attention of the Dublin government alive to the problem of partition.

⁵⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 248.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁵² M. A. Hopkinson, 'Collins, Michael', DIB.

Since it was mainly thanks to Collins that the Ulster question was on the Free State political agenda, his death had a negative impact on the northern policy. However, it was not the only reason why the Dublin government failed to implement the agreed “peace policy”. The Boundary Commission itself undermined the establishment of good north-south relations. It is significant that Blythe’s committee paid little attention to the Commission, while Macnaghten’s report did not even mention it. The Commission represented an obstacle to what the two documents recommended. If the Provisional Government were to adopt a rapprochement policy towards the Belfast government, this would have been hardly reconciled with the demand for territorial readjustment.

In October 1922, the Provisional Government established the North-Eastern Boundary Bureau, an office tasked with the preparation of evidence supporting the transfer of northern areas to the Free State. Despite its efficient organisation and relentless work, the government did not seem anxious to publicise the Bureau at first. This contributed to raise concern in Northern Ireland, especially after May 1923, when the official end of the Civil War appeared to remove the main obstacle to the implementation of the Boundary Commission. The war had not only been an excuse for the Provisional Government: even Kevin O’Shiel, Director of the Boundary Bureau, advised postponing the establishment of the Commission until the end of the conflict, when they would in a position to guarantee law and order in the country.⁵³ Otherwise, the Irish were unlikely to get a favorable verdict, since it would have been easy for their opponents to argue against the transfer of territory to a state where a conflict was going on.

However, many northern nationalists had been very critical of the decision to wait until the end of conflict before engaging in the Commission’s work. In July 1923, Peter Hughes, Sinn Féin TD for Louth-Meath, complained that northern Catholics were starting to think that the Dáil was not willing to have the Commission implemented since no action had been taken yet.⁵⁴ In response to Hughes’ concern, William Cosgrave, President of the Executive Council, announced that the Minister for Education, Eoin MacNeill, had been chosen to represent the Irish Free State in the Commission. After the announcement, Cosgrave seized the opportunity to speak a few words about the partition question. He complained that the

⁵³ J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 143.

⁵⁴ Dáil Éireann Debate, 20 July 1923, Vol. 4 No. 14. Adjournment of the Dáil –the Northern Boundary Question.

boundaries of the state of Northern Ireland had been “drawn by the Act of 1920 in a quite arbitrary fashion, not in accordance with the ascertained will of the people concerned, but in such a way as to give a section of this people an extent of territory wholly out of proportion to their local majority”. He finally expressed the hope that the division of Ireland was only temporary, but wished that as long as it lasted it be as fair as possible for the peace of the whole country.

Although in the first part of his speech Cosgrave strongly criticised the border, he sounded sceptical about the Commission in the second part, being very cautious about the end of partition. He mentioned the will of the people but not geographical and economic considerations. It seems reasonable to assume that Cosgrave deliberately omitted this aspect because he was aware that it would likely constitute a weak point in the nationalist case.

The fact that only after having been specifically asked about it, Cosgrave informed the Dáil of MacNeill’s appointment confirms the government’s reluctance to face the northern question; however, this did not prevent southern politicians from exploiting partition for electoral propaganda. In March 1923, Cosgrave and other pro-Treaty forces created a new party, Cumann na nGaedheal. As the August general elections approached, Ulster and the Boundary Commission became central to the political discourse, especially in border areas. Cumann na nGaedheal’s candidates stressed the necessity of having a strong national party to tackle the boundary question. Ernest Blythe addressed a public meeting in Monaghan by claiming that the revision of the border was the most important thing for the welfare of the nation, and that only if they had the absolute majority in the Dáil would they be in a position to take a strong line in connection with the Boundary Commission.⁵⁵

All across the country, from Cork to Galway to Monaghan, Cosgrave and his ministers advocated the essential unity of Ireland and discharged the responsibility of partition, which rested instead with the politicians who had preceded them. At the general elections, Cumann na nGaedheal became the first party, obtaining 63 seats, whereas de Valera’s Sinn

⁵⁵ *The Anglo-Celt*, 7 July 1923.

Féin had 44 representatives and constituted the second political force.⁵⁶ Since Sinn Féiners refused to take their seats, Cosgrave's party held a comfortable majority in the Dáil.

Despite the end of the Civil War and the election of a new government in the Free State, there was no progress over the implementation of the Boundary Commission. The Northern Ireland government still refused to choose their representative, while the British seemed to play a waiting game. In early November, newspapers reported that a conference between northern and southern representatives was supposed to be held in the near future to discuss the boundary. Sean Milroy, Cumann na nGaedheal TD for Cavan, welcomed the conference as the best opportunity to "break down that damnable barrier which sectarian bigotry and intriguing politicians have made", since he believed that the Commission could not really "bring that ideal of national unity in the full sense".⁵⁷

The conference was finally held on 1 February, when Cosgrave, Craig and the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald met at the Colonial Office in London to discuss the boundary question. The Irish delegation comprised Ernest Blythe, who had become Minister for Finance, the Attorney General Hugh Kennedy and the Minister for Home Affairs Kevin O'Higgins. Delegates met twice and agreed to reassemble again within one month. No report was made to the Dáil and no official statement was issued by the Irish government. The Irish press strongly supported the conference option against the Boundary Commission. *The Irish Times* wished that the future conference could solve the Ulster problem since the verdict of the Boundary Commission, regardless of its content, would compromise any chance of good relations between North and South.⁵⁸ The *Freeman's Journal* optimistically wrote that the fact that the conference was to reassemble indicated good will from both parts, and therefore "a settlement on amicable lines" was likely.⁵⁹

The second conference, scheduled for 2 March, did not take place due to the sudden illness of James Craig. In the following months, the conference option seemed to fade due to Craig's serious condition, and the Dublin government demanded that the British chose a chairman for the Commission. Finally, on 5 June, a telegram was read in the Dáil announcing

⁵⁶ F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1963), p. 485.

⁵⁷ Dáil Éireann Debate, 2 November 1923, Vol. 5 No. 10. National Finances – Northern Boundary Commission.

⁵⁸ *The Irish Times*, 4 February 1924.

⁵⁹ *The Freeman's Journal*, 4 February 1924.

the appointment of Mr. Justice Feetham, a member of the South African Supreme Court, as chairman. In the Free State, nobody complained about Feetham's appointment since he was considered competent and impartial.⁶⁰ However, many in the Free State were skeptical about the Boundary Commission's likely contribution to improving the life of the nationalist community in the North. Opposition to the Commission emerged at public occasions such as the commemoration of John Redmond in Wexford. John Dillon, who had taken the lead of the Parliamentary Party after Redmond's death in 1918, criticized the government's endorsement of a commission designed to draw a permanent boundary in Ireland and make partition irreversible.⁶¹

Criticism did not only come from opposition parties: even some Cumann na nGaedheal deputies believed that the Council of Ireland had better chances than the Commission to bring about unity.⁶² The Council, as envisaged by the Government of Ireland Act, was an all-Ireland law-making authority with the power to legislate on common matters such as fisheries, contagious diseases of animals and railways. According to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the Council would continue to be in force in Northern Ireland in case the Belfast Parliament voted to opt out of the Free State. Initially, Craig showed a good disposition towards it, and soon after its opening, the Belfast parliament chose its representatives to it.⁶³ However, things rapidly changed, and in September 1921, the northern Prime Minister stated that, since the Council had limited powers on minor issues, he did not care about its establishment.⁶⁴

In January 1922, the first Craig-Collins Pact committed the Belfast and Dublin governments to design solutions alternative to the Council of Ireland for dealing with common matters, but after Collins' death, both sides let drop the question. During a Dáil debate in June 1924, some deputies claimed that the postponement of the Council was illegal, and demanded its establishment. They believed that the Council would be the "actual working proof" of Irish unity, since it provided the two governments with an opportunity to develop and implement

⁶⁰ K. J. Rankin, 'The role of the Irish Boundary Commission in the entrenchment of the Irish border: From tactical panacea to political liability', *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 34, No. 3, (2008), p. 240.

⁶¹ *The Freeman's Journal*, 10 March 1924.

⁶² *Dáil Éireann Debates*, 13 June 1924, Vol. 7 No. 24. Private Business – the Boundary Commission.

⁶³ D. Kennedy, *The Widening Gulf* (Belfast, 1988), p. 60.

⁶⁴ *The Belfast Newsletter*, 21 September 1921.

a common policy on matters relevant to both states.⁶⁵ They were answered that the reason for the postponement was that the Council's Constitution needed to be revised since there had been major institutional changes after the Government of Ireland Act. For example, there were no more a Lord Lieutenant or Joint Exchequer Board, since the Free State was not part of the United Kingdom, but a self-governing dominion. Revision of the Council of Ireland's Constitution, however, was never undertaken.

Meanwhile, since the northern government still refused to designate their representative, whereas MacNeill and Feetham were ready, Cosgrave agreed that the British chose a delegate for Northern Ireland so that the Commission could start its work. In October 1924, Joseph R. Fisher, former editor of the liberal unionist paper *The Northern Whig*, was designated to represent Northern Ireland, and the Commission finally assembled in November.⁶⁶

The fact that the proceedings of the Boundary Commission were kept secret does not completely explain why the boundary question was not mentioned in the Dáil for over a year. From an analysis of Dáil debates, it emerges that several deputies were not interested in the issue, and were used to leaving the chamber every time the issue was under discussion. Almost all those who spoke about Ulster were from border counties, in particular from Donegal, Cavan and Leitrim.⁶⁷ Interest in the Boundary Commission was linked to the constituency that TDs represented, rather than to the parties they belonged to. In general, by the time of the Commission's establishment, many had turned their attention to the Boundary conference and the Council of Ireland, thinking that these had better chances to work for a future reunification of the island. The inconsistency in the belief that a commission that was set up to decide on the delineation of a border would eventually remove the border itself was finally emerging.

⁶⁵ Dáil Éireann Debate, 18 June 1924, Vol. 7 No. 26. Private Business – the Boundary Commission (resumed debate).

⁶⁶ D. Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912-1939* (Oxford, 1998), p. 139.

⁶⁷ Dáil Éireann Debates: 4 Jan. 1922, Vol. 7, No. 11. Debate on Treaty; 17 Jan. 1923, Vol. 2 No. 18. Ceisteanna – Questions – Boundary Commission; 20 July 1923, Vol. 4 No. 14. Adjournment of the Dáil – the Northern Boundary Question; 2 November 1923, Vol. 5 No. 10. National Finances – Northern Boundary Commission; 13 June 1924, Vol. 7 No. 24. Private Business – the Boundary Commission; 18 June 1924, Vol. 7 No. 26. Private Business – the Boundary Commission (resumed debate).

- **The North Eastern Boundary Bureau**

In October 1922, Kevin O'Shiel was chosen as Director of the newly-established North-Eastern Boundary Bureau, in charge of the preparation of material to argue the nationalist case before the Commission. A barrister from Omagh (Tyrone), he had been a member of the Parliamentary Party, but left because he disagreed with their northern policy. He then joined Sinn Féin, and in 1922, became assistant legal adviser to the provisional government. He was also Michael Collins' advisor on northern issues.⁶⁸

O'Shiel gave an efficient organisation to the Bureau, and was skilful in recruiting experienced staff from different backgrounds. For example, Patrick Lynch was a barrister and ex-member of the Parliamentary Party, who joined Sinn Féin and opposed the Treaty. He became Free State Attorney General between 1936 and '40.⁶⁹ Joseph Johnston, a Protestant economist from Tyrone, was lecturer at Trinity College Dublin and became adviser on regional economy for the Bureau.⁷⁰ Sergeant K. C. Hanna, later Mr. Justice, was an Ulster Presbyterian, and according to Geoffrey J. Hand, "the ablest of the counsel retained by the Irish Free State".⁷¹ Edward Millington Stephens held the position of Secretary of the Bureau. He was a Protestant Dublin barrister, and had been one of the joint secretaries to the committee appointed by the Provisional Government to draft the constitution of the Irish Free State.⁷² He was optimistic about the chances of having the boundary revised. He believed that the new Labour minority government supported by the Liberals, brought to power after the December 1923 British general elections, would not support the Belfast government as the Conservatives had done, thus favouring the nationalists.⁷³

The Director of the Bureau, however, was not as confident as the Secretary. O'Shiel was very sceptical about the Boundary Commission, a contradiction that does not appear to have affected his work, which he carried on with great zeal. In December 1922, he wrote in a memorandum for the government that their ultimate goal should be the unity of Ireland

⁶⁸ M. Coleman, 'O'Shiel, Kevin Roantree', DIB.

⁶⁹ B. Ó Cathaoir, 'Lynch, Patrick Gregory', DIB.

⁷⁰ G. McElroy, 'Johnston, Joseph', DIB.

⁷¹ G. J. Hand (ed.), *Report of the Irish Boundary Commission 1925* (Shannon, 1969), p. XIII.

⁷² A. Carpenter and L. W. White, 'Stephens, Edward Millington', DIB.

⁷³ P. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its origins, 1886-1925* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 127-8.

“because it is natural and efficient, because it is convenient and economic, and most of all because it is enduring and makes directly for peace”.⁷⁴ However, as he wrote to the Executive Council in December 1923, he believed that the Commission would foster partition instead of bringing about unity. O’Shiel believed, in accordance with the recommendations of the committee, that claiming northern territory would deepen hostility between North and South, making the obtainment of unity more difficult.⁷⁵

The Bureau compiled statistics and collected an impressive quantity of data on the distribution of the population, local economy and geography of border areas. As early as January 1923, the Bureau was ready to present a document proposing a revision of the boundary that would have transferred south the whole of Fermanagh and Tyrone, the city of Derry, the constituency of South Armagh and one quarter of county Down.⁷⁶ The Bureau considered this readjustment as the minimum demand to which the Free State was entitled. In the same year, the Bureau published the *Handbook of the Ulster Question*, presenting the nationalist case for boundary adjustment through a series of arguments ranging from historical to political, to economic and geographic. As the *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs* wrote at the time of its publication, “even those who differ from its conclusion will find the book a useful one, containing as it does a brief historical epitome, full statistical tables with economic and geographic information, and several useful maps”.⁷⁷

In the *Handbook*, partition was attributed to religious differences exploited by people, who were not named, whose interests demanded the division of the Irish nation.⁷⁸ In other words, the current situation in the North was the result of British interference that fomented artificial divisions among Irish people. The *Handbook* offered a historical and political analysis of the Ulster question according to which the Irish nation was founded upon race, not religion. Ulster Protestants were considered as a minority, but not as a different nation. Since the nation was the source of political legitimacy, northern unionists were not entitled to a separate state.

⁷⁴ J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 143.

⁷⁵ P. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its origins, 1886-1925* (Dublin, 2011), p. 147.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 146.

⁷⁷ *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs*, Reviewed Work: ‘Handbook of the Ulster Question’, Vol. 2, No. 6, (Nov., 1923), p. 262.

⁷⁸ North-Eastern Boundary Bureau (issued by), *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (Dublin, 1923), p. V.

This classical nationalist analysis was followed by a strong objection against the northern boundary that it was not only unjustified, but also unfair, since it did not respect those religious majorities on which it was supposed to be based. After arguing against Fermanagh and Tyrone being incorporated into Northern Ireland, several pages were devoted to rejecting the religious homogeneity of the four counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down and Londonderry. However, even if the four counties were homogenous, this “could not be held to justify a breach of the obvious national unity of Ireland, for there is a limit to the privileges which can be extended to national minorities. (...) A nation is the reconciliation of differences, not the assertion of uniformity, and if North-East Ulster has qualities and aptitudes different from the rest of Ireland, those qualities and aptitudes should be developed within and not without the national organism”.⁷⁹ However, the *Handbook* admitted that re-union was not in sight, and urged the Boundary Commission to “correct the most obvious aspect” of partition, by redrawing the border.⁸⁰

Economic tables and statistical data were provided by Sean Milroy. As secretary of a committee established to advise the Irish treaty delegation on Ulster, he wrote a series of articles for the *Young Ireland* in 1922, arguing that Northern Ireland could not survive politically or economically.⁸¹ Milroy claimed that the Six Counties did not have the necessary resources of revenue to face their difficult financial position without the help of the British Treasury. Since this kind of assistance was not likely to continue, “the entire collapse of the Partition establishment in North-East Ulster will be inevitable”.⁸² This claim was re-proposed in the *Handbook*, which compared the financial situation of Northern Ireland with that of the Free State, arguing that the latter was far more solid.

The economic inconvenience of the boundary was also due to the fact that it divided 140 agricultural holdings, and cut across more than twenty railway tracks, as well as roads and lanes.⁸³ A customs barrier along the border would be expensive and inconvenient.

Finally, the boundary cut off a number of commercial centres, such as Newry and Derry, from their market areas. The Boundary Commission, according to the *Handbook*, had to

⁷⁹ North-Eastern Boundary Bureau (issued by), *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (Dublin, 1923), p. 41.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. VII.

⁸¹ M. Coleman, ‘Milroy, John Ignatius (‘Seán’)', DIB.

⁸² S. Milroy, *The Case of Ulster* (Dublin, 1922), p. 154.

⁸³ North-Eastern Boundary Bureau (issued by), *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (Dublin, 1923), p. 98.

restore the market areas to their respective market centres, “for a boundary giving effect substantially to the wishes of the inhabitants can easily be drawn which will also be a boundary of minimum economic inconvenience”.⁸⁴

In conclusion, there was the analysis of international cases similar to that of Ulster. The Bureau prepared detailed reports about recent European cases of disputed boundaries where local plebiscites had resulted in territorial transfers. Kevin O’Shiel travelled to Geneva to examine material from other boundary commissions at the League of Nations archives. The cases of Silesia, Hungary and Klagenfurt were selected and analysed in comparison with Northern Ireland. The case of Silesia was particularly relevant.⁸⁵ Here, the wishes of the inhabitants and economic and geographical conditions did not coincide, and the League of Nations decided to privilege the former through a plebiscite. Since the Boundary Commission was supposed to follow these precedents, the *Handbook* suggested ascertaining the wishes of the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, and then redrawing the boundary in accordance. This was the only way for the Commission to perform its task and “give effect to the principle of self-determination”.⁸⁶

The *Handbook of the Ulster Question* well exemplified the inconsistencies and the limits of the Free State’s policy towards Northern Ireland and the Boundary Commission. The ideal of national unity and the reality of partition were not reconciled, and the redrawing of the border constituted an uneasy compromise. Arguments against the existence of Northern Ireland were ideological, except for Milroy’s claim about the likely end of British economic support. They denied the authenticity of unionists’ claims and implied that Northern Ireland’s existence was temporary. However, as Cosgrave stated when he announced MacNeill’s designation, as long as the boundary lasted it had to be as fair as possible, although it was evident that border’s adjustments along fairer lines could strengthen the position of Northern Ireland and weaken the Free State’s claim to unity. Moreover, if Northern Ireland was intended to disappear soon, there was little point in redrawing the boundary.

⁸⁴ North-Eastern Boundary Bureau (issued by), *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (Dublin, 1923), p. 121.

⁸⁵ See T. K. Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence* (Oxford, 2010).

⁸⁶ North-Eastern Boundary Bureau (issued by), *Handbook of the Ulster Question* (Dublin, 1923), p. 152.

Economic arguments in favour of border adjustments were quite solid because they were based on geography and statistical data. Since the Home Rule negotiations, partition had always been considered in territorial terms, and little attention was paid to the boundary itself and to its practicalities and consequences. No boundary experts were consulted.⁸⁷ The border lacked geographical coherence: as Estyn Evans pointed out, “since in Ireland county boundaries frequently ran along rivers which later attracted urban settlements”, trade and social intercourse had developed irrespective of county borders.⁸⁸ It was not hard for the North Eastern Boundary Bureau to argue that the boundary had negative repercussions for trade and economy in border areas. The comparison between the Ulster question and other ethnically divided regions was another strong point in the argumentation in favour of border adjustments.

In conclusion, the *Handbook* presented a number of reasoned arguments in favour of boundary revision, but the inconsistency between them and the claim for national unity somewhat undermined the efficacy of the nationalist case. In particular, the end of partition appeared much more as a dream than as realistic perspective to be pursued through a specific state policy. For example, while arguing against a customs barrier, the Free State established customs posts along the border in April 1923.⁸⁹ Consequently, several northern producers and wholesalers turned to British and local markets, and only Derry and Enniskillen continued to trade with their hinterlands in the Free State.⁹⁰

- **Towards the implementation of the Commission: Northern Ireland**

As Michael Collins observed, northern nationalists had mixed feelings about the Boundary Commission: they lacked a plan of action and despite their common opposition to partition, they seemed incapable of overcoming their differences.⁹¹ In general, the section of the Catholic population close to Devlin’s party tended to be skeptical about the revision of the

⁸⁷ K. J. Rankin, “The Provenance and Dissolution of the Irish Boundary Commission”, *Working Papers in British-Irish Studies*, No. 79, (2006), p. 2.

⁸⁸ E. Estyn Evans, “The personality of Ulster”, *Institute of British Geographers – Transactions*, no. 51, (Nov. 1970), p. 4.

⁸⁹ A. Jackson, *Ireland, 1798-1998* (Oxford, 1999), p. 280.

⁹⁰ D. Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912-1939* (Oxford, 1998), p. 140.

⁹¹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 182.

border, in particular in Belfast and north-east areas that retained no hope of transfer south. A small minority among them, mainly the business and professional classes in touch with Captain Macnaghten, supported the recognition of the Belfast parliament's authority, but Devlin was cautious in that respect. He was aware that the recognition policy would have been unpopular at that stage. The majority of Catholics in Belfast and in the rest of the country accused the unionist government of tolerating, if not encouraging, sectarian violence against them that was still widespread in Northern Ireland in the first half of 1922.

Co-operation with unionists likely seemed impossible to the majority of nationalists, regardless of whether they were Sinn Féiners or Devlinites, and many preferred to look south for support. Collins, the most trusted by northern Catholics among southern leaders, insisted on the non-recognition policy and assured financial support by persuading the Provisional Government to pay the salaries of Catholic teachers in the North. Therefore, despite his personal belief, Devlin chose to abstain from the Northern Ireland parliament for the moment, and waited to see how the situation evolved.

The death of Michael Collins, which "robbed northern nationalists of their best friend in the Provisional Government", and the decision to suspend the payment of Catholic teachers' salaries, raised concern among the minority in Northern Ireland.⁹² In parallel, reforms of local government abolished Proportional Representation and reconfigured council areas. Shortly before his death, Collins protested that these reforms were "intended to paint the counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh with a deep orange tint in anticipation of the operation of (...) the Boundary Commission".⁹³

The main concern of the Belfast administration was to strengthen its control of the territory and exclude nationalists from power in order to neutralize their opposition to the unionist state. It is likely, though, that by assuring unionist control of a number of predominantly Catholic areas, local government reforms contributed to weakening the case for transfer to the Free State. For example, the urban elections of January 1923 assured unionist control over Derry city, Dungannon, Downpatrick, and Enniskillen. In these constituencies, nationalists did not even contest the elections since they felt they had been completely

⁹² A. Jackson, *Ireland, 1798-1998* (Oxford, 1999), p. 273.

⁹³ Letter from Collins to Churchill, 9 August 1922, M. Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill* (London, 1975), Vol. iv, p. 744.

disenfranchised, and no registration work was carried out.⁹⁴ In other towns, such as Belfast, Newry, Armagh, Strabane, Warrenpoint and Omagh, nationalists decided to contest the elections. In Belfast, republicans and nationalists ran against each other, since they did not succeed in designing a common strategy. Nationalists chose to ignore the border question, arguing that the partition did not matter in municipal elections, and pledged to take their seats if elected, unlike Sinn Féiners.⁹⁵

As a result, Devlin's party regained its prominent position in the two main Catholic wards, where eight nationalist candidates were elected to the town's corporation. In other constituencies, nationalists and republicans ran together and retained control of local councils, as in Omagh, Newry and Warrenpoint. Despite the Executive Council recommending an end abstention for local elections, in Newry, a number of die-hard Sinn Féiners refused to stand as candidates since they rejected the oath of allegiance imposed by the Belfast government.⁹⁶ On the other hand, in Omagh, the republican Michael Lynch, managing director of the North West of Ireland Printing and Publishing Company, became chairman of the Urban Council. At the first meeting of the council, nationalist representatives took the oath of allegiance to the Belfast government but approved a resolution that "notwithstanding such a declaration we in no way abate our claim to have this area brought under the control of the Irish Free State in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants".⁹⁷

The urban elections of January 1923 show the extent of the disorganization and lack of any consistent policy by both republicans and nationalists. Not only did they lack a common anti-partition strategy, but they were internally divided. Whereas in Belfast nationalists stressed the necessity of defending Catholics' rights in the town's corporation, in border areas they favoured contesting elections in order to hold local councils in areas where the majority of the inhabitants wanted to join the Free State, thus making a strong case before the Commission. It appears that their policy adapted according to the constituency. On the other hand, republicans struggled to find a compromise between their inflexible attitude towards the unionist government, and the need to prove their commitment to the

⁹⁴ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 261.

⁹⁵ *The Irish News*, 4 January 1923.

⁹⁶ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 270-1.

⁹⁷ *The Ulster Herald*, 27 January 1923.

Boundary Commission by taking the oath and seats in local boards. It is likely that divisions and contradictions within the two parties contributed to alienating the Catholic population from politics.

In general, Devlin and his supporters repeatedly lamented the delay in the implementation of the Commission not because they were optimistic about its outcome, but because it prevented them from taking any action by postponing the settlement of the minority status within Northern Ireland. The difficulty of the Nationalist Party in designing a consistent policy towards the Boundary Commission remained unresolved in the following years. In May 1923, a Hibernian demonstration in Magherafelt (Londonderry) approved a resolution that “that pending the complete reunification of our people in Ireland, we consider that the clause in the Treaty setting up a boundary commission to determine the area to be controlled by the Northern parliament should be immediately set in operation”.⁹⁸ At another demonstration in Castletwellan (Down), Joe Devlin clearly stated that until the Boundary Commission was established, nationalists were not going to enter the Belfast parliament.⁹⁹ However, public endorsement of boundary rectification did not imply the abandonment of the recognition policy by Devlin. He privately carried on efforts to unite all nationalist forces in Northern Ireland and persuade them to enter the Belfast parliament. According to the RUC, who closely watched nationalist activities, by July 1923 the attempt proved abortive due to the opposition of republicans.¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, Sinn Féin continued to publicly support the redrawing of the boundary and trust in the Dublin government. The republican press welcomed the appointment of Eoin MacNeill since he was a Catholic from the glens of Antrim, and had been elected representative of Derry city twice. “Our interests are quite safe in his hands”, *The Derry People* wrote enthusiastically, since MacNeill was “alive to the fact that the Catholic citizens of the maiden city (Derry) outnumbered by several thousands all other denominations put together”.¹⁰¹ The paper, owned by Michael Lynch’s publishing company, optimistically

⁹⁸ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-27, Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. Secret report of the demonstration in Magherafelt, 12 May 1923).

⁹⁹ *The Irish News*, 14 May 1923.

¹⁰⁰ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-27, Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. Letter from Inspector General’s Office, RUC, to the Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs. 5 July 1923.).

¹⁰¹ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 28 July 1923.

foresaw the transfer of Fermanagh, Tyrone and Derry city. On the contrary, after the announcement of MacNeill's designation, John Nugent, National Secretary of the AOH, wondered if it was due to a real commitment by the Free State government to "honor its pledge to the Ulster nationalists", or simply to electoral propaganda.¹⁰²

The two factions maintained similar attitudes towards the Boundary Conference in early 1924. Nationalists welcomed the conference since they saw it as a step in the right direction, whereas republicans continued to reiterate their commitment to the Commission. At the news of the conference, the *Ulster Herald* wrote that "a settlement to be fair and just cannot be effected on terms other than those laid down in Article 12 of the Treaty. The conference is, however, the first practical move in this matter".¹⁰³ Unlike the southern press, the paper interpreted the conference's adjournment as evidence of its failure, and insisted on the implementation of the Commission. The *Derry People* took a similar stance after the designation of Justice Feetham, a few months later. Confident that clause 12 would bring about a completely new border, the paper welcomed the chairman's appointment after "too much time wasted in useless conferences and conversations".¹⁰⁴

However, there were a number of prominent northern Sinn Féiners ready to renounce the Commission in case the conference was successful. At the Cumann na nGaedheal's Ard Comhairle in Dublin, Archdeacon Tierney, a leading republican priest from Enniskillen, proposed a motion requesting the Executive Council to press the British government for a resumption of the Boundary conference, and if no acceptable offer was made there, they should demand the implementation of clause 12.¹⁰⁵

In September 1924, *The Times* published correspondence dating back to March 1922 between Lord Birkenhead, one of the signatories of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and Arthur Balfour, former conservative Prime Minister.¹⁰⁶ Birkenhead assured Balfour that the Boundary Commission was not going to alter the border significantly. As a reaction, the Nationalist Party seemed to shift to a stronger stance in favour of recognition and against boundary revision. John Skeffington, Tyrone President of the AOH, addressed a meeting in

¹⁰² *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1923.

¹⁰³ *The Ulster Herald*, 2 February 1924.

¹⁰⁴ *The Derry People*, 7 June 1924.

¹⁰⁵ *The Freeman's Journal*, 7 March 1924.

¹⁰⁶ *The Times*, 8 September 1924.

Sixmilecross asserting that if the boundary was to be merely rectified, that would only bring dissatisfaction. He also wondered what protection would be guaranteed to Catholics left in Northern Ireland if Fermanagh and Tyrone were transferred to the Free State. He concluded by denying that any border readjustment could bring about unity, since the northern state would survive even if left with four counties as long as it had the support of London.¹⁰⁷

The designation of Fisher and the final inauguration of the Commission galvanized northern republicans, who felt confident that their loyalty to the Dublin government was to be finally rewarded. They turned back to their abstention policy after most of them had compromised and taken seats in local boards. A conference of prominent republicans such as J. S. Harbison, Cahir Healy and Michael Lynch, agreed that, since the Boundary Commission was operating and was certainly going to include Fermanagh and Tyrone in the Free State, there was nothing to be gained by having representatives at Westminster, and thus they selected no candidates for the forthcoming general elections.¹⁰⁸ To reinforce optimism about the outcome of the Commission, the *Ulster Herald* observed that one of the experts at the disposal of Justice Feetham was a man “specially versed in the taking of plebiscites”, since he had served in the East Prussia international commission.¹⁰⁹

The vague definition of the Boundary Commission’s task and the temporizing attitude of the Dublin government increased the uncertainty of northern parties struggling to design their policies in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Commission became a burden for Devlin, who was working hard to regain the support lost after his endorsement of the Lloyd George’s proposal for temporary exclusion of the Six Counties from Home Rule in 1916. Nationalists were accused of having contributed to partition, and were anxious to prove their commitment to national unification. Despite having little confidence in the Commission, Devlin did not take a clear stance against it as he feared alienating border nationalists who hoped to join the Free State. Moreover, he could not deny that the Commission had some chances, although remote, to improve the life of a section of northern Catholics. However, Devlin’s claim to represent all northern Catholics regardless of their proximity to the border, and the consequent caution, partially paralyzed the

¹⁰⁷ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-27, Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. Report of AOH meeting in Sixmilecross on 14th September 1924).

¹⁰⁸ *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1924.

¹⁰⁹ *The Ulster Herald*, 8 November 1924.

Nationalist Party and, despite advocating recognition, they only entered the Belfast parliament in April 1925.

- **The preparation of evidence in Northern Ireland**

Soon after its creation, the North Eastern Boundary Bureau appointed agents to help organise local committees, choose witnesses and prepare evidence to argue the nationalist case before the Commission. In general, the Bureau recruited local representatives or election agents in Northern Ireland, and required them to furnish the central Dublin office with frequent reports of their work's progression.¹¹⁰ Local agents prepared briefs concerning their localities by answering a series of questions circulated by the Bureau to help them present their cases.¹¹¹ Most of the questions regarded the local economy, trade routes, market areas, and the attitude to the boundary issue of the working classes and of the various commercial and manufacturing interests.¹¹² A large part of the information initially gathered was presented in the *Handbook of the Ulster Question*.

In November 1924, a meeting of northern agents working for the Bureau agreed that the Free State should demand a plebiscite based on Poor Law Unions, in the belief that this solution would grant them the transfer of big portions of northern territory.¹¹³ Feetham rejected the proposal claiming that, since legal provisions had not been made for plebiscites, they were not envisaged. He argued that the Commission would ascertain the wishes of the population by examining the last elections' results, the 1911 census and by consulting local representatives.¹¹⁴ Since the last elections were held after a reconfiguration of electoral areas that favored unionists, and the census was thirteen years old, the best chance for northern Catholics to have their voice heard was through the presentation of witnesses and statements of evidence. Therefore, between November 1924 and May 1925,

¹¹⁰ PRONI, D921/2/3/1 (Collins, Newry, solicitors' papers: correspondence with NEBB. Circular n°1. Local organization in the North Eastern area).

¹¹¹ PRONI, D/921/2/3/28 (Collins, Newry, solicitors' papers: correspondence with NEBB. Letter from Stephens to Collins, 9 Dec. 1922).

¹¹² PRONI, D921/2/3/21 (Collins, Newry, solicitors' papers: correspondence with NEBB. List of 12 questions sent by the NEBB regarding the situation of Newry).

¹¹³ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 310.

¹¹⁴ K. J. Rankin, "The Provenance and Dissolution of the Irish Boundary Commission", in *Working Papers in British-Irish Studies*, No. 79, 2006, p. 16.

local agents organised public meetings to appoint committees and select witnesses. They invited present and past members of rural, urban, and county councils, as well as farmers, publicans, hoteliers and representatives of the local trade and commerce.

The selection of witnesses was based on similar criteria all across Northern Ireland as local agents advised that “the first choice should fall on men who were rural councilors or poor law guardians to the dissolution of the boards”.¹¹⁵ Witnesses were often members of the committees, but in some cases, it seems that they agreed to prepare statements under the supervision of local agents without further involvement in the Commission’s preparations. There were no clear instructions over the political orientation of designated witnesses, and in some cases local committees selected republicans while in others they preferred nationalists. For example, in Glassdrummond (Armagh) and Arney (Fermanagh), committees chose local Hibernians to represent them, whereas in Boho (Fermanagh) and Carrickcruppin (Armagh) they selected Sinn Féiners. In Carrickcruppin, the witness was a lodger with strong republican views, and an uncle of a former IRA man who was served with an order prohibiting him from residing in Northern Ireland.¹¹⁶ It appears that the political affiliation of committees’ members greatly influenced the selection of witnesses.

Since Craig’s government was very concerned about boundary adjustment, northern police forces watched the activities of the nationalist population in connection with the Commission, as well as the movements of local agents. The RUC generally compiled accurate reports including the names of the most prominent participants and conveners of the meetings. Analysis of these reports does not hint that the RUC actively pursued a policy of intimidation of potential witnesses in order to prevent them from co-operating with the Commission. However, this was not the opinion of the personnel of the North Eastern Boundary Bureau. In summer 1923, O’Shiel lamented that police forces in Northern Ireland closely followed the movements of local agents, whereas Stephens believed that the RUC actively discouraged nationalists from volunteering for the Commission’s hearings.¹¹⁷ It is likely that those who attended meetings in connection with the Boundary Commission were

¹¹⁵ PRONI, D921/2/6/69 (Collins, Newry, solicitors’ papers: correspondence. Instructions. Business of meeting simply to appoint one or two delegates for each district electoral division for the purpose of giving evidence).

¹¹⁶ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from the District Inspector to the Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, 20 Feb. 1925).

¹¹⁷ P. Murray, *The Irish Boundary Commission and its origins* (Dublin, 2011), pp. 157-8.

aware of the risk of being identified by infiltrated RUC detectives, as they knew that Belfast authorities were suspicious of any kind of Catholic political activities, reunions and associations. This certainly constituted some form of intimidation, but it is difficult to estimate to what extent the RUC was responsible for the difficulty in recruiting witnesses.

Several factors might have influenced how Catholics responded to the preparation of evidence for the Commission. Proximity to the border, and the consequent likelihood of transfer to the Free State undoubtedly played a major role. Belfast nationalists, for example, did not show much interest in the Commission, according to a report for the Boundary Bureau completed in October 1923.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, the local agent in Belfast, the republican solicitor George Martin, prepared a brief for counsel that he submitted to the Bureau.¹¹⁹ He admitted that the case for inclusion of Belfast and Antrim in the Free State was very difficult, and recommended that, if transfer was not possible, the southern government should demand safeguards for northern Catholics. Martin recalled that during the 1919 elections he had witnessed several Catholic voters in the Newtownards Road being severely beaten and intimidated. He claimed that the pogroms were started to drive Catholics out of certain areas of Belfast and thus assure control to unionists. He believed that the fact that Belfast Catholics expected no fair treatment from unionists should be the main argument in favour of transfer. No other documents arguing the transfer of Belfast and Antrim were produced. It is likely that the Bureau appointed Martin to receive periodical reports about the situation there, and not really to prepare for the Boundary Commission.

The RUC reported that sixteen meetings in preparation for the Commission took place in Northern Ireland between November 1924 and May 1925, and the majority were held in county Armagh (nine), followed by Fermanagh and Tyrone (three each), while one was organised in Newry, a town divided between Armagh and Down.¹²⁰ It is unlikely that the RUC infiltrated all the meetings held in connection with the Boundary Commission, and the scarcity of reports from certain areas does not necessarily imply that there were no activities. For example, the absence of meetings in county Down was likely due to its

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 158-9.

¹¹⁹ NAI, NEBB 4/4/1 (Briefs for legal counsel representing the Irish Free State at Boundary Commission hearings. Brief for counsel on behalf of citizens of the city of Belfast).

¹²⁰ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25).

proximity to South Armagh. The two areas shared the same local agent, John Henry Collins, a Newry solicitor who had served as republican election agent in 1921. Collins worked relentlessly and encouraged Catholics from county Down to attend meetings in Armagh. In the first months of 1925, he personally supervised the preparation of at least thirty statements of evidence.¹²¹

Collins appears to have been unpopular among some sections of the population. The report by the RUC of a meeting organised by Collins in Newry in December 1924 stated: "It is understood some members of the old Nationalist Party were present and took the matter light heartedly, but will give no assistance and will look upon the meeting as one got up by Collins with the help of Sinn Féin followers to secure prominence before the public, when he failed by other means".¹²² The decision of the North-Eastern Boundary Bureau to appoint a die-hard republican such as Collins was aimed at strengthening the non-recognition of the unionist parliament, while a more compromising attitude, such as that of Belfast nationalists who had taken their seats in the town corporation, could undermine their claim. However, it appears that the Bureau's choice also prevented a section of the population from contributing to the preparations for the Commission.

In South Down a number of meetings designated people to act as witnesses before the Commission without consulting them, and in some cases (Newcastle, Dromara and Ballynahinch) they refused to be involved. The man designated in Dromara was ex-RIC and the current postmaster and, according to RUC reports, he refused to act as a delegate because he had nothing against the Belfast government and did not wish for inclusion into the Free State.¹²³ In Ballynahinch, the man chosen at the meeting was a large farmer and ex-district councilor, "a most respectable man".¹²⁴ Their refusals might have been motivated by a fear of the police forces. There is no evidence that those who volunteered as witnesses faced reprisals, but a number of people might have preferred to avoid any risk of antagonizing the authorities. It is possible that those who refused to be involved in the

¹²¹ NAI, NEBB/4/3/8 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms, Newry).

¹²² PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to the Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, 18 Dec. 1924).

¹²³ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to Secretary, 23 Feb. 1925).

¹²⁴ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to Secretary, 4 Mar. 1925).

Commission's preparations were not only anxious to distance themselves from republicanism, but also did not believe that border readjustment could improve their condition.

In general, it appears that meetings in preparation for the Boundary Commission were not very successful in South Down and South Armagh. According to police reports, the clergy and the population were "apathetic", and took little interest in the Commission.¹²⁵ A report from a District Inspector in Armagh claimed that several people had refused to attend a meeting in Newry in February 1925. The District Inspector wrote: "It is stated that the matter is treated as a joke, and that nobody anticipates that South Down will be included in the Free State. Very little interest is taken in these meetings, and the majority of the R. C. [Roman Catholic] farmers in the Sub-District state quite frankly that they prefer to remain in Northern Ireland".¹²⁶ It is unlikely that Catholic farmers in South Down enthusiastically wished to remain in Northern Ireland, although it is possible that they were not particularly keen on transfer to the Free State. It seems reasonable to assume that several factors contributed to alienate South Down Catholics from the preparations for the Boundary Commission, from fear of reprisals to the unpopularity of John Collins, to political disillusionment.

Despite a limited popular participation at meetings, J. H. Collins managed to obtain a high number of statements in favour of the transfer of South Armagh and South Down. Almost a hundred statements were produced by individuals residing in the area, and a few others were prepared by local bodies. The majority of individual statements presented similar arguments and, in some cases, used the same formulae to describe the situation of different townlands, Poor Law Unions and other administrative units, such as Warrenpoint, Middletown, the Union of Kilkeel. They claimed to have no economic or commercial connection with the rest of Northern Ireland since their market areas extended into the Free State, making the border inconvenient. For example, a number of inhabitants of Crossmaglen (Armagh) explained that people from Monaghan, Armagh and Louth used to

¹²⁵ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to Secretary, 21 Feb. 1925).

¹²⁶ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to Secretary, 23 Feb. 1925).

come there to buy and sell their goods, and that their traditional market towns were Dundalk and Castleblaney, in the Free State.¹²⁷

Since trade routes and market areas did not respect county borders, economic arguments against the custom barrier were quite convincing, and they recurred in all statements, together with evidence about the religious composition of the local population. In order to show that the majority of the inhabitants wished for inclusion in the Free State, some witnesses quoted the 1911 census, whereas others claimed they had counted the number of Catholics of their localities. The correspondence between religion and wish for transfer to the Free State was generally implied, although in a few cases witnesses took care to point out that they had enquired into the matter. For example, a merchant from Middletown (Armagh) wrote: "I am well aware that all the Catholics are wishful to live in Saorstat Eireann and any to whom I have spoken on that subject have so expressed their wish".¹²⁸ Like evidence from South Down and South Armagh, a statement demanding the transfer of Armagh city contained arguments about the economic disadvantages and religious composition, but also a long disquisition on the historical importance of the ecclesiastical metropolis of Ireland. The author of the statement was Patrick Lavery, solicitor and local agent in charge of Armagh city.¹²⁹

All the statements signed by J. H. Collins presented the same structure and contained little or no reference to their authors' situation. They all used the same lines to conclude: "Taking everything into consideration I am of opinion that the majority of the people of our area are not satisfied to remain under the control of the Northern Government; and the District would benefit considerably by being included in the Free State".¹³⁰ A significant number of documents presented arguments based on personal experiences. Most of these statements were not signed by J. H. Collins, which suggests that they were not produced under his supervision. They described how the border and the custom barrier were damaging their authors. For example, a general merchant reported exact figures of his losses by comparing his turnover in 1920 and 1924; a bacon and ham curer argued that his business could better

¹²⁷ NAI, NEBB 4/3/8 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Proposed evidence of Mr. James Coyne).

¹²⁸ NAI, NEBB 4/3/8 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement by Austin Burke).

¹²⁹ NAI, NEBB 4/3/1 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Armagh city).

¹³⁰ NAI, NEBB 4/3 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms).

develop through Louth, Monaghan and Cavan; a merchant tailor stated that should the Dáil pass the anticipated duty on manufactured woolen goods, his trade with the Free State would be compromised.

Not only merchants and businessmen had complaints about the border. A large farmer from the Union of Newry had one part of his agricultural holdings north and one part south of the border, which forced him to travel to Dundalk to carry out his southern business.¹³¹ The border seemed to cause great inconvenience because only certain roads were approved for crossing, and sometimes people had to take a roundabout of two or three miles. A farmer from Culloville near Crossmaglen lamented that the closest railway station, despite being only 600 yards far from his house, was in the Free State, and thus every time he travelled to Castleblaney, which was only six miles away in county Monaghan, he had to make a journey of 31 miles.¹³² Although not all these statements succeeded in making a strong case for transfer, they provided a series of examples of how the border was causing inconvenience to many living in its proximity. The fact that they were written in first person and described their authors' experience made them sound more persuasive than those that followed a standard model.

There were a few cases where the border was not directly responsible for the witness' difficulty. A merchant from Keady (Armagh) claimed he had been damaged by the Belfast boycott and reported that his turnover had fallen by £ 5,000 between 1919 and 1923. He believed he could recover his business if his area was incorporated to the Free State where most of his customers lived.¹³³ In another statement, the Chairman of the Urban District Council of Warrenpoint (Down) complained about the economic policy of Northern Ireland. Warrenpoint was a seaside resort but the Belfast government did not patronize it; consequently, the Great Northern Railway Hotel had closed up.¹³⁴ Only one statement mentioned discrimination against the Catholic minority. John McArdle, a farmer from Keady, demanded his area to be transferred because he believed he could "get neither justice nor

¹³¹ NAI, NEBB 4/3/8 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of Edward Nugent).

¹³² NAI, NEBB 4/3/8 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of Patrick Cunningham)

¹³³ NAI, NEBB 4/3/1 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of James Trainor).

¹³⁴ NAI, NEBB 4/3/8 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of Thomas Howard Caulfield).

consideration from the northern government".¹³⁵ This was the only example of this kind from Down and Armagh.

It seems that economic complaints were considered a better argument for transfer to the Free State than grievances about the sectarian attitude of the government. This might be due to different factors. It is possible that witnesses did not mention discrimination fearing reprisal from police forces in case their statements were discovered. However, it is unlikely that, if they really feared reprisal, they would have released statements in the first place. They might have tried to stress the economic disadvantages of the border, and ignored political aspects such as discrimination, in order to present their demand for transfer in a more objective and less prejudicial way. In other words, they did not want their demands to sound like grievances against the unionist government or population, but as legitimate requests based on strong evidence. This might be confirmed by the choice of witnesses, the majority of whom were farmers, merchants and heads of small business activities.

Surprisingly, three witnesses sounded little concerned about the fate of their territory. A general merchant claimed that, regardless of what government it was ruled by, the port of Kilkeel would continue to dispatch granite and rough timber, hinting that there was no need for transfer of the area to the Free State. The other two witnesses were from the Poor Law Union of Newry. John O'Hare, Director of the Channel Coal and Shipping Co. Ltd., claimed confidently that his customers would have always bought their coal from him because it was cheap, and thus the boundary did not affect his business.¹³⁶ Another witness, Joseph Bennett, was even blunter. A businessman exporting his products to England and Scotland from the port of Newry, he wrote: "The change in the Government will not make any difference whatever to the trade".¹³⁷ These statements constituted an exception not only in Armagh and Down, but in the whole Northern Ireland, and it is unlikely that they were presented to the Commission. Since J. H. Collins was anxious to gather and present a lot of material, he might have put pressure on people who were not really persuaded of the advisability of transfer.

¹³⁵ NAI, NEBB 4/3/8 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of John McArdle).

¹³⁶ NAI, NEBB 4/3/7 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of John O'Hare, 17 Feb. 1925).

¹³⁷ NAI, NEBB 4/3/7 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of Joseph F. Bennett of Canal Street, Newry, 16 Feb. 1925).

In Fermanagh, Catholic representatives insisted on the demand for a plebiscite, despite Feetham's rejection. Cahir Healy, leader of local republicans and Westminster MP, unsuccessfully tried to persuade the Dublin government to withdraw its support for the Commission after a plebiscite was denied. In December 1924, a conference of Fermanagh nationalists presided over by Archdeacon Tierney passed a resolution stating that "any ascertainment of the views of individuals or public bodies elected for gerrymandered constituencies" was a misrepresentation of the views of the people.¹³⁸ The uncompromising attitude of Fermanagh nationalists might explain the low number of meetings in preparation for the Commission. However, this may also be a consequence of sharp divisions between republicans and nationalists close to Joe Devlin. In March 1925, the Devlinites boycotted a meeting in Enniskillen to approve evidence to submit to the Commission, in protest at Healy's designation as nationalist candidate for the following elections.¹³⁹ Since the Devlinites were not consulted over the matter, they refused to co-operate with republicans in connection with the Boundary Commission.

Finally, only 25 statements from Fermanagh were prepared for the Commission. They often referred to their authors' experience and did not seem to conform to a given model as was standard for those from Down and Armagh. They were likely written without supervision since they were not signed by any local agent, but they presented similar arguments about the wishes of the inhabitants and economic disadvantages caused by the border. Most of the witnesses were farmers and many had taken an active part in local politics, having served as county and rural councilors. They claimed that several areas were cut off their market towns and stressed the inconvenience of the customs barrier.

In Fermanagh, as in the Crossmaglen area, crossing the border was not easy. A witness from Rosslea complained that his village was only half a mile from the border with Monaghan, but since northern officials had destroyed bridges in 1922, it took a long journey to enter the Free State, where the closest railway stations were located.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, Rosslea's market town was Clones (Monaghan), but since several roads were unsuitable for heavy traffic, local business and trade were damaged. The border also affected the administration

¹³⁸ *Fermanagh Herald*, 20 December 1924.

¹³⁹ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to Secretary, 24 Mar. 1925).

¹⁴⁰ NAI, NEBB 4/3/10 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Evidence of Luke Connelly).

of Lough Erne, constituted by two connected lakes. Its Drainage Board was under two jurisdictions because a canal connected it to Clones, and a number of witnesses considered it advisable to have only one administration dealing with flooding. However, in their statements they did not complain about mismanagement of the lake after partition.

Unlike in Down and Armagh, several witnesses complained about the treatment of Catholics by the Belfast government. Fermanagh County Council prepared a statement recommending the use of Registers of Voters to examine the composition of the population since the last elections were held under a gerrymandered scheme.¹⁴¹ Cahir Healy wrote a long statement that was very critical of northern authorities and police forces. He attacked the government's decision to require an oath of allegiance from members of local boards, and denounced the arrest of 57 Fermanagh Catholics after the Belfast pogroms. Healy attached an article from *The Fermanagh Herald* of 7 February 1925 about the Board of Guardians of Lisnaskea, a body that was under the control of unionists despite the fact that the area was predominantly Catholic. All those who applied for aid were asked by the Guardians what they were going to state in case they were interviewed by the Commissioners. The Guardians openly warned applicants that preference for the Free State or Northern Ireland would determine the outcome of their applications.¹⁴²

Open criticism of the Belfast government's treatment of Catholics confirms the radical character of Fermanagh republicanism dominated by Cahir Healy. A devoted Sinn Féiner, he strongly supported the non-recognition policy and the Boundary Commission, and was interned by northern authorities from May 1922 to February 1924.¹⁴³ He fiercely opposed any idea of co-operation with unionists and, although he was not appointed local agent, worked with the Boundary Bureau to prepare the case for Fermanagh. Complaints about sectarianism and discrimination were likely due to Healy's influence.

One of the statements from Fermanagh was prepared by Peter O'Neill, who claimed to represent 250 nationalist ex-servicemen who had served in the First World War. They complained that the Belfast government discriminated against them in terms of affordable

¹⁴¹ NAI, NEBB 4/3/10 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement to the Boundary Commission from Fermanagh County Council).

¹⁴² NAI, NEBB 4/3/10 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Evidence of Cahir Healy).

¹⁴³ E. Phoenix, 'Healy, Cahir', DIB.

housing and employment in public bodies. In fact, they had received only two houses of all those erected by the Enniskillen Urban Council.¹⁴⁴ This was not the only group of nationalist ex-military demanding to have their area transferred to the Free State. Another reunion of 120 ex-servicemen of the British army took place in Omagh (Tyrone) at the end of December 1924. They drafted resolutions protesting against partition but, unlike in Fermanagh, did not complain about unequal treatment.¹⁴⁵ This meeting was one of three held in Tyrone in connection with the Boundary Commission and reported by the RUC. The other two, which were held in April and May 1925, had different degrees of success.

The one in Dungannon was very popular as practically every parish in the county was represented.¹⁴⁶ On the contrary, at Killeenan Chapel (Kildress), the congregation attending showed little interest in the Commission.¹⁴⁷ The fact that only three meetings were reported does not imply that there was little activity in connection with the Commission in Tyrone, as one of the police reports stated that there had been several assemblies in the county. RUC reports on nationalist meetings in Tyrone were not only low in number, but also less detailed than those prepared in Down, Armagh and Fermanagh. This might suggest that the local police was less attentive than in other counties. Moreover, a significant amount of evidence produced in Tyrone argued against transfer to the Free State. For example, the North-West Tyrone Boundary Defence Committee, a unionist body, suggested the transfer of the townland of Fearne, where the road linking Strabane to Castlederg passed, into Northern Ireland. They also stated that the Commission should consider the wishes of the farmers owning and occupying the lands, not those of the migratory population of labourers.¹⁴⁸ Other statements were produced by the Congregational Committee of the Strabane Presbyterian Church and the Traders' Association.

It appears that the population in Tyrone was not widely involved in the preparation of evidence, as the majority of statements came from public figures instead of private citizens.

¹⁴⁴ NAI, NEBB 4/3/10 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Evidence of Peter O'Neill).

¹⁴⁵ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to the Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, 1 Jan. 1925).

¹⁴⁶ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to Secretary, 5 May 1925).

¹⁴⁷ PRONI, HA/32/1/21 (Boundary Commission, reports on activities, 1924-25. Letter from District Inspector to Secretary, 7 May 1925).

¹⁴⁸ NAI, NEBB 4/3/11 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement by the North-West Tyrone Boundary Defence Committee).

Alex Donnelly, a solicitor appointed local agent in Tyrone by the North-Eastern Boundary Bureau, prepared a 20 page statement in which the history of Ulster was told in a way to prove unionist opposition to democratic reforms, such as franchise extension and Home Rule. After quoting a correspondence between Lloyd George and Craig showing that the British saw partition as an injustice, Donnelly took several pages to illustrate gerrymandering in detail, and to demonstrate the sectarian character of the Special Constabulary. He recalled the letter by Wickham about new Ulster Volunteers to be recruited in a special C class in November 1921.¹⁴⁹ According to Donnelly, the recruiting and organization of the C Specials from an unauthorized loyalist defense forces showed that the Special Constabulary was meant to bring about civil war.

Finally, Donnelly claimed that the Boundary Commission had power only over northern territory, and that it should transfer the whole Tyrone since this was in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, as well as with economic and geographic reasons.¹⁵⁰ Unlike previous statements, Donnelly openly suggested what the Commission should do. This appears to have been a common trend in Tyrone, as other witnesses included instructions for the commissioners in their statements. Michael Lynch of the North-West of Ireland Printing and Publishing Company, after complaining about the reactionary methods of the Belfast administration, suggested that the Commission approach the northern question from the standpoint of the whole Ulster. He recommended that the Commission fix the boundary as to have as little traffic as possible across it, and in a way to keep administrative areas intact.¹⁵¹ Reverend John H. McKenna, who claimed to represent the “native element”, prepared a 25 page statement and a map outlining a proposed new boundary in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants.¹⁵² McKenna’s proposed scheme, signed by representatives of Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Armagh and Down, drew a new boundary from Coleraine through Lough Neagh, round Armagh city and eastwards to the coast.

Among those who gave evidence arguing the Tyrone case, George Murnaghan and John Devine produced the most detailed statements. The latter was a provision merchant

¹⁴⁹ See ch. 1, p. 21.

¹⁵⁰ NAI, NEBB 4/3/3 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Case of county Tyrone. Alex E. Donnelly, Omagh).

¹⁵¹ NAI, NEBB 4/3/3 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement by Michael Lynch).

¹⁵² NAI, NEBB 4/3/3 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Evidence of Rev. J. H. McKenna).

deputed by Strabane Urban District Council to give evidence. Devine expressed concern over the trade of his town because it needed a free outlet to the Free State. He gave a list of merchants who had opened stores in Lifford (around one mile away from Strabane, in the Free State) in order to retain at least some of their trade with Donegal.¹⁵³ Murnaghan's father, George senior, had been nationalist MP in mid-Tyrone for fifteen years, until in 1910 the Ancient Order of Hibernians selected another candidate. Murnaghan ran as Independent thus splitting the nationalist electorate, and a unionist won the elections. His resentment might explain his son's creation of the Irish Nation League in 1916, a small party that merged with Sinn Féin soon after its birth.¹⁵⁴ Murnaghan junior was a solicitor who had worked as election agent in Fermanagh and Tyrone for more than 20 years. He provided a detailed explanation of the reasons why Catholics were underrepresented on the voters' lists.¹⁵⁵ The main reasons for the inclusion of Tyrone in the Free State were historical and political, according to the evidence produced. Here, as in Fermanagh, discrimination against Catholics was deeply resented, and constituted the basis of the claim for transfer.

There are no reports of meetings in preparation for the Commission from county Londonderry, but despite little police attention, it appears that there was quite a lot of activity between late 1924 and the first months of 1925. In the city of Derry, the number of Catholics was higher than that of Protestants (22,923 against 17,857), unlike in the rest of the county.¹⁵⁶ After the reform of local government, nationalists abstained from municipal elections in January 1923, thus leaving the town's Corporation in unionists' hands. However, this did not diminish the population's hopes of joining the Free State, according to a report completed in March 1923 by an agent of the Boundary Bureau.¹⁵⁷ But, as in Tyrone, the population seemed little involved in the preparations for the Commission since most of the statements were produced by public bodies and organizations.

The local agent in charge of Derry represented an exception to the Bureau's policy of selecting loyal republicans. Hugh C. O'Doherty, a solicitor who had served as Mayor as an

¹⁵³ NAI, NEBB 4/3/3 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Copy of John Devine's intended evidence on behalf of U.D.C. Strabane).

¹⁵⁴ B. Hourican, 'Murnaghan, George', DIB.

¹⁵⁵ NAI, NEBB 4/3/13 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of evidence of George Murnaghan).

¹⁵⁶ D. Gwynn, *The History of Partition, 1912-1925* (Dublin, 1950), p. 122.

¹⁵⁷ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 278.

Independent Nationalist, was a fierce antagonist of the Parliamentary Party at the time of the negotiations for the Government of Ireland Act. But after the Anglo-Irish Treaty, he became very critical of Sinn Féin and of the policy of abstention, although he remained optimistic about the Boundary Commission.¹⁵⁸ Despite O'Doherty's appointment, it seems that the bulk of the work in preparation for the Commission was in the hands of the Derry Nationalist Boundary Committee. The chairman of the Committee was a solicitor from Donegal, John Tracy, who was also a member of the Nationalist Registration Association. It was Tracy, not O'Doherty, who supervised the production of a statement by the Derry Poor Law Union, arguing that the majority of the people living there wished for inclusion in the Free State.¹⁵⁹

The most important document that Tracy's Committee produced was a 40 page pamphlet arguing that Irish unity was the main goal of the majority of the inhabitants of Derry, but as long as this was impossible, they claimed the right to join the Free State.¹⁶⁰ The Committee stressed that the transfer of Derry was in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, as well as economic and geographic conditions. According to the pamphlet, it was necessary to hold a plebiscite to ascertain the wishes of the inhabitants, because gerrymandering had unfairly altered the composition of elected boards so as to give unionists a majority even where they were in a minority. In order to reinforce the discrimination argument, the pamphlet quoted from the *Memoir of the city and North-Western Liberties of Londonderry*, issued by the Ordnance Survey Office in 1837, to show how local Catholics were persecuted by Protestants. The economic case presented in the pamphlet was well structured, and argued that Derry needed Donegal because the internal trade of the county was insufficient to maintain its economic importance. Moreover, the port of Derry served several Free State counties such as Sligo, Leitrim, Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal.

Further proof of the strict economic connection between Derry city and Donegal was provided by unionist bodies demanding the transfer of portions of Donegal to Northern Ireland. For example, the Corporation, as owners of town's Water Undertaking, demanded a

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 173.

¹⁵⁹ NAI, NEBB 4/3/1 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Representation of Derry Poor Law Union to the Irish Boundary Commission).

¹⁶⁰ NAI, NEBB 4/3/5 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Representation from Londonderry to the Irish Boundary Commission).

rectification of the boundary to include into Northern Ireland an area of the Free State where there was a reservoir supplying Derry.¹⁶¹ The Londonderry Port and Harbor Commissioners demanded the transfer of portions of Donegal, from where a number of unionist associations asked for inclusion in Northern Ireland.¹⁶²

The Secretary of the Derry Nationalist Boundary Committee, James Bonner, did not submit his evidence as a private citizen but as Secretary of the Derry Diocesan Catholic Friendly Society, a State Insurance society of about 10,000 members. He was also a representative to the Executive Body of the Derry Nationalist Registration Association, and had been a member of the town corporation from 1918 to 1922. Finally, Bonner was personally in touch with Stephens in Dublin during the spring of 1925, when the Commission visited Northern Ireland.¹⁶³

Unlike Down and Armagh, those in charge of the preparations for the Commission in Derry did not try to collect as many statements as possible, but selected a few authoritative witnesses, such as Bonner, who had been involved in local politics for 25 years, and Charles O'Neill, who had a distributing business and was Senior Deputy Lieutenant for the city. He had been High Sheriff, Harbor Commissioner, and chairman of the company leasing the only Public Customs Warehouse in the city. In his statement, O'Neill accused the northern government of privileging the economic development of Belfast over that of Derry, which had led to the crisis of local industry: the distilleries and shipyard had closed, while the shirt and collar trade was struggling to survive. Consequently, unemployment had risen dramatically in the town. O'Neill was convinced that the best way to improve the economic situation of Derry city was through transfer to the Free State, because it would become the leading port in the North-West. Although O'Neill's hostility to the Belfast government emerged clearly, he took care to stress that it did not result from his hostility towards

¹⁶¹ NAI, NEBB 4/3/3 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Representation of the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses, of the city and county borough of Londonderry).

¹⁶² NAI, NEBB 4/3/5 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Statement of the Londonderry Port and Harbour).

¹⁶³ NAI, NEBB 4/3/6 (Copy/statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Correspondence between J. Bonner and E. M. Stephens, 27 Apr. – 16 June 1925).

unionism: "I am not a politician and the above opinion is the best of my belief, merely on business and economic grounds".¹⁶⁴

In general, statements of evidence from Fermanagh and Tyrone argued for the transfer of the whole counties, whereas those from Armagh and Down tended to refer to specific rural areas such as villages, townlands, and Poor Law Unions. This was likely due to the fact that Fermanagh and Tyrone had a predominantly Catholic population, although the distribution of the inhabitants was irregular. In fact, north, east and west Tyrone had Catholic majorities, while most of the inhabitants of south Tyrone and north Fermanagh were Protestant. Nevertheless, it appears that those in charge of the Commission's preparations in the two counties were quite confident about their transfer. Although they mentioned the economic disadvantages and the practical inconvenience of the boundary, they made clear that they resented the border for including them in a state where they did not wish to live since they were not treated equally.

The fact that Fermanagh and Tyrone demanded the inclusion in the Free State of the whole counties might have facilitated their argument. As already mentioned, the territorial terms on which partition was discussed, were those of single counties, but it was not clear what administrative units the Boundary Commission were taking cognizance of. Arguing for the transfer of an entire county was more straightforward than dealing with small portions of territory such as poor law unions and townlands. In the case of Derry, since the town corporation had fallen into unionists' hands, the Nationalist Boundary Committee was anxious to stress that the majority of the inhabitants were Catholics. This argument was strengthened by the existing connections between the town and county Donegal, thus suggesting that ideological and political arguments were as important as social and economic relations.

In South Down and South Armagh, J. H. Collins had a different approach. It seems that he paid more attention to the quantity of evidence than to its quality, as if he believed that only a significant number of statements could prove the necessity of transfer.

Variations in the number of statements collected and the different emphasis on the various

¹⁶⁴ PRONI, D868/4 (Deposition to Boundary Commission relating to Londonderry. Evidence of Mr Charles O'Neill).

arguments presented, suggests that the Boundary Bureau provided local agents with general instructions, but left them a high degree of autonomy in the preparation of evidence.

- **The work of the Commission and its collapse**

Between November 1924 and July 1925, the commissioners visited border areas in Northern Ireland and the Free State to hear representations from nationalist and unionist communities. They interviewed 575 witnesses, the majority of whom appeared as members of deputations from associations and public bodies.¹⁶⁵ During the interviews, the commissioners generally asked about the different arguments that witnesses presented in their written statements. It is hard to establish to what extent hearings influenced the Commission's final deliberation. According to G. J. Hand, the interviews were only aimed at showing that the Commission worked with fairness and impartiality, giving the opportunity to both communities to express their wishes.¹⁶⁶ In fact, Feetham believed that the wishes of the inhabitants could not justify any change in the border unless the majority in favour of readjustment was overwhelming. His reluctance to award transfers of territory based on the population's preference was due to the fact that he considered this kind of data as unreliable. The electoral balance was distorted by trans-border Catholic workers and by the high transfer of Specials from various areas in Fermanagh and Tyrone. The 1911 census contributed to misrepresent the population of Northern Ireland because of the high Catholic birth rate.¹⁶⁷

Although nationalists did not lack chances to argue their case before the Commission, they grew anxious as they observed that the commissioners did not travel very far from the existing border, and that Feetham's questions during the hearings suggested that he was not contemplating the transfer of counties or significant portions of territory.¹⁶⁸ It was only after the collapse of the Commission that it became clear that Feetham interpreted his task

¹⁶⁵ G. J. Hand (ed.), *Report of the Irish Boundary Commission, 1925* (Shannon, 1969), p. 12.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

¹⁶⁷ M. O'Callaghan, 'Old parchment and water; the Boundary Commission of 1925 and the copperfastening of the Irish border', *Bullán, an Irish Studies Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1999), p. 40.

¹⁶⁸ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 322.

as that of merely adjusting existing boundary, thus showing an “inherent bias in favour of the by-then pre-existing”.¹⁶⁹

Meanwhile, Craig called for parliamentary elections to be held in early April 1925. Northern nationalists and republicans united in a common front, although a small section of Sinn Féiners, generally close to the anti-Treaty side in the South, rejected any alliance with Devlin’s party and ran alone. Nationalists and republicans struggled to design a common policy on abstention, and finally agreed to allow elected Belfast and Antrim representatives to take their seats, since the two constituencies were not under the consideration of the Boundary Commission.¹⁷⁰ Nine of the ten candidates representing both sections of nationalism, all running as “nationalists”, were successful. Devlin, elected with Protestant and Catholic votes in West Belfast, and the MP for Antrim, T. S. McAllister, took their seats at the end of April. Republicans won one seat in Armagh and one in Down, and they continued their policy of abstention from the Belfast parliament.

During the summer 1925, the commissioners retired to examine the evidence in their possession. In October, they drew-up a draft map of the new border, envisaging a 3.7% reduction of northern territory, the inclusion of Donegal areas of Derry’s hinterland in Northern Ireland, whereas little portions of South Armagh, Fermanagh and Tyrone were to join the Free State. The new border undoubtedly favoured Northern Ireland because southern areas transferred north had almost equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics, whereas northern territories with Catholic majorities that were to join the Free State had very few Protestant inhabitants.¹⁷¹

The official report was not made public until 1969. On 7 November 1925, the *Morning Post*, an English unionist paper, published leaked notes of the boundary negotiations, including a draft map suggesting that the border would not be significantly altered except for the transfer of big portions of East Donegal to Northern Ireland, whereas the Free State would gain only minor areas.¹⁷² Although the report was not completely accurate, the commissioners did not officially dismiss it. Francis Bourdillon, Secretary to the Commission,

¹⁶⁹ M. O’Callaghan, ‘Old parchment and water; the Boundary Commission of 1925 and the copperfastening of the Irish border’, *Bullán, an Irish Studies Journal*, vol. 4, no.2 (1999), p. 39.

¹⁷⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 319.

¹⁷¹ G. J. Hand (ed.), *Report of the Irish Boundary Commission, 1925* (Shannon, 1969), p. 249.

¹⁷² F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1963), p. 491.

tried to stop speculation by asserting that the *Morning Post*'s report was unjustified, but the news that political circles in Belfast believed the draft findings to be "near the mark" echoed in British and Irish press.¹⁷³ Rapidly, public opinion grew persuaded of the authenticity of leaked notes, and nationalists in the North were particularly alarmed.

On 9 November, a deputation from East Donegal travelled to Dublin to meet Cosgrave, O'Higgins and Blythe, who insisted that the Commission had no power to transfer Free State territory. However, "the delegates did not go away completely reassured", and in the following days other deputations met the Irish government.¹⁷⁴ Representatives from South Armagh, and a delegation from Tyrone led by Alex Donnelly expressed the same view to Cosgrave and his cabinet: it was better to leave the boundary as it was than to redraw it according to the draft published by the *Morning Post*.¹⁷⁵ Anger, scepticism and anxiety characterised the nationalist press' reports in the North. The *Fermanagh Herald* lamented that Cosgrave's replies to TDs' questions about the Commission were "evasive and unsatisfactory", and no northern deputations had been reassured after meeting the government in Dublin.¹⁷⁶ The *Derry People and Donegal News*, which had showed unshakable confidence in the Commission, admitted that it was natural to be concerned about what was "going on behind the scenes".¹⁷⁷

In the Free State, embarrassment and anger grew rapidly, since the transfer of territory to Northern Ireland had not been expected. Denis McCullough, one of the founders of the Belfast Boycott Committee and Cumann na nGaedheal TD for Donegal, received several letters from people in his constituency alarmed by news about the transfer of portions of their county.¹⁷⁸ During the parliamentary debate, McCullough accused the Executive Council of indifference towards the fate of "fellow country-men in the Six Counties" since the government had not intervened on the question, but Cosgrave replied by dismissing the leaked report as unreliable since it was published by a unionist paper. The President did his best to reassure the deputies by reiterating his trust in the Commission's integrity and sense

¹⁷³ *The Irish Independent*, 9 November 1925.

¹⁷⁴ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 14 November 1925.

¹⁷⁵ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 329.

¹⁷⁶ *The Fermanagh Herald*, 21 November 1925.

¹⁷⁷ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 14 November 1925.

¹⁷⁸ Dáil Éireann Debate, 19 November 1925, Vol. 13 No. 7, the Boundary Commission.

of justice, but he could not give details of the negotiations since Eoin MacNeill never shared any information with his government.

Speculation continued in the press, until 20 November, when MacNeill resigned from the Boundary Commission, thus reinforcing concerns about the authenticity of the *Morning Post* report. He explained that the Commission could not reach unanimity due to the difference of interpretation of Article 12 between him and Feetham, which resulted in a report he could not subscribe to.

In general, the nationalist border press in Northern Ireland reacted violently to MacNeill's resignation. The *Ulster Herald* ran the headline "Boundary Commission Farce", and reported that in "well-informed quarters in Dublin" the situation was considered very serious.¹⁷⁹ With a pragmatic approach, the Devlinite *Irish News* recommended that the Dublin government seek an agreement leaving the border as it was but assuring more guarantees for the minority.¹⁸⁰ In the Free State, all parties and the public opinion vehemently opposed the transfer of Donegal areas to Northern Ireland. Cosgrave came under pressure from all quarters to prevent the implementation of the Commission's report.

At this point, the governments of the Irish Free State, Northern Ireland and Britain decided to meet and block the publication of the report, which would have immediately become legally binding.¹⁸¹ The new boundary published by the *Morning Post* outraged the Free State, but did not satisfy the northern government either. Moreover, its implementation could lead to a new wave of violence in the North and along the border. Cosgrave, Craig and the British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin met in London to find a compromise and avoid new disorders in Ireland. On 3 December, they signed an agreement according to which the 1920 boundary would stay as it was, and, in return, London would not demand payment of the Irish share of the Imperial debt as agreed under Article 5 of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The Council of Ireland was abolished, and its powers transferred to the northern government.

Discussion of the "Treaty (Confirmation of Amending Agreement) Bill" in the Dáil started on 7 December, when Cosgrave introduced the bill asking for it to be considered with

¹⁷⁹ *The Ulster Herald*, 28 November 1925.

¹⁸⁰ *The Irish News*, 26 November 1925.

¹⁸¹ K. J. Rankin, 'Deducing rationales and political tactics in the partitioning of Ireland, 1912–1925', *Political Geography*, Vol. 26, No. 8, (Nov. 2007), p. 927.

urgency.¹⁸² A number of deputies reacted with indignation at this request, and lamented that several TDs were absent, while many had not yet received a copy of the Bill. Ignoring protests and confusion, Cosgrave stressed the dangers that the agreement allowed them to avoid because the Boundary Commission's report "instead of promoting peace and harmony between Irishmen, would, if it had become effective, have sown the seeds of distrust and hate and disorder".¹⁸³ After these remarks, Cosgrave mainly focused on the release from liability for a proportion of the service of the public debt of the United Kingdom, which he presented as a great achievement, despite omitting to mention the exact figure of money that the Free State was supposed to pay.

The debate continued for three days, until the Dáil finally passed the Bill by a vote of 71 to 20, on 10 December. Despite the high number of deputies who finally voted in favour of the ratification of the Bill, this was not seen as a success. For example, Connor Hogan (Farmers Party TD for Clare) refused, "to laud this thing [the Bill] as a victory, because Article V of the Treaty is not brought into operation".¹⁸⁴ However, as for the Anglo-Irish Treaty, there appeared to be no alternative proposals about the Ulster question, and the majority of the deputies supported the government. Not even abstentionist republicans made alternative proposals.

On the day before the agreement was presented for discussion, a meeting of the Republican Party presided over by TD Sean Lemass took place in Dublin. They received a telegram from Canon O'Neill and Rev. J. Larkin saying that county Tyrone supported them in the repudiation of the agreement.¹⁸⁵ De Valera made a powerful speech accusing the pro-Treaty side of having consented to partition once again after 1921, and lamented that Craig's claim over most of the northern territory was unjustified because large areas had Catholic majorities. However, they did not propose any alternative settlement. A number of republicans believed that they could exploit the failure of the Commission by entering the

¹⁸² Dáil Éireann Debate, 7 December 1925, Vol. 13 No. 14, Treaty (Confirmation of Amending Agreement) Bill, 1925.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Dáil Éireann Debate, 10 December 1925, Vol. 13 No. 17, Private Business. - Treaty (Confirmation of Amending Agreement) Bill, 1925. – Second Stage (Resumed).

Article V of the Anglo-Irish Treaty made the Free State 'liable for an unascertained share of the British public debt and also for the payment of certain war pensions'. F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1963), p. 492.

¹⁸⁵ *The Irish Examiner*, 7 December 1925.

Dublin parliament and forming an anti-partition group, but the majority of de Valera's supporters preferred to continue abstention.¹⁸⁶

The Free State press generally welcomed the agreement with optimism since it finally gave the country peace and stability.¹⁸⁷ Little attention was paid to northern nationalists' reactions to the agreement, and even those papers reporting that Catholics in the North felt betrayed did not show much sympathy towards them. In terms of north-south relations, most papers welcomed the elimination of the Council of Ireland that was unpopular on both sides of the border, and argued that its absence would encourage the northern and southern governments to discuss common matters on more friendly terms.¹⁸⁸

The attitude of the Free State government fostered a sense of betrayal among northern nationalists and republicans. Cosgrave's statement that the best guarantee of security for minorities was the good will of their neighbours was particularly resented as it sounded as if Dublin was abandoning northern Catholics to their destiny.¹⁸⁹ Northern nationalists sent a deputation to Dublin in order to make their views known to the Dáil. Cosgrave turned them away asserting that, as representatives of the nation, he and his colleagues were in touch with their people without having any views put before them.¹⁹⁰ It is interesting that Cosgrave spoke about northern nationalists as part of the Irish nation, but declined any responsibility towards them.

After the Dáil ratified the agreement, the *Leitrim Observer* commented: "the permanent boundary of Ireland was never so assured as now".¹⁹¹ This meant that representatives of northern Catholics had to reconsider their strategies without any support from the Free State. As Cahir Healy put it, in the North "they relied upon the Free State guarding their interests under the Treaty, instead of which they have sold them in exchange for a mess of pottage (...). Nationalists must now look around and decide their own course of action without reference to the Dublin play boys".¹⁹² According to the *Irish Independent*, Tyrone

¹⁸⁶ J. Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster Question, 1917-1973* (Oxford, 1982), p. 89.

¹⁸⁷ NAI, DFA/1/GR/671 (Department of Foreign Affairs. Press reports on the Boundary Agreement).

¹⁸⁸ *The Irish Times*, 5 December 1925.

¹⁸⁹ Dáil Éireann Debate, 7 December 1925, Vol. 13 No. 14, Treaty (Confirmation of Amending Agreement) Bill, 1925.

¹⁹⁰ Dáil Éireann Debate, 9 December 1925, Vol. 13 No. 16, Deputation of Northern Nationalists.

¹⁹¹ *The Leitrim Observer*, 12 December 1925.

¹⁹² *The Anglo-Celt*, 12 December 1925.

republicans were already considering their next moves. They felt they had two possibilities: allying themselves with the most extreme section of Sinn Féin that had contested the last elections alone, or forming a united nationalist front and entering the Belfast parliament.¹⁹³

This latter was the policy recommended by the *Irish News*.¹⁹⁴ The Devlinite paper claimed that in the last years the republican leadership had prioritized the consolidation of the Free State and almost completely ignored the grievances of northern Catholics. According to the *Irish News*, the agreement gave northern Catholics “one advantage – and it is neither small nor mean: we have passed out of a period of uncertainty, deceit, false pretence and humbug and we find ourselves face to face at last with the stern realities of the situation which so many amongst us declined to consider during the past three or four years”.¹⁹⁵ The *Derry Journal* invited northern nationalists to “regard themselves as a definite entity waiting for a better day, but making the utmost of the passing hour”.¹⁹⁶

Despite the successful alliance at the last elections, the nationalist front in Northern Ireland was still divided by old hostility and suspicion, and it took years for the Nationalist Party to regain consensus and integrate a number of Sinn Féiners. However, the failure of the Boundary Commission, and its handling by the Free State government, facilitated reconciliation by letting down republicans who hoped to be transferred south, and generally relied on the Executive Council to guard their interests. It was a unifying experience for the minority because, regardless of their political affiliation, all Catholics, even those living far from the border and retaining no hope for transfer, were disappointed by the final agreement and felt betrayed by the Free State.¹⁹⁷ Now that the end of partition was ruled out for the foreseeable future and the South no longer provided any assistance, two main obstacles to the unity of Catholic representatives disappeared.

However, some refused to become part of a nationalist bloc: the most extreme section of republicanism remained alienated from politics. They formed the National Defence Association of Armagh and Down, the only two counties that elected two republicans.

¹⁹³ *The Irish Independent*, 7 December 1925.

¹⁹⁴ *The Irish News*, 7 December 1925.

¹⁹⁵ *The Irish News*, 10 December 1925.

¹⁹⁶ *The Derry Journal*, 9 December 1925.

¹⁹⁷ B. Barton, ‘Northern Ireland, 1925-1939’, in J. R. Hill (ed.), *A New History of Ireland Volume VII: Ireland 1921-84* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 217-8.

Leaders of the association were John Quinn, who worked with J. H. Collins at the preparations for the Boundary Commission, Patrick Lavery, local agent in charge of Armagh city, and Peter Murney, who was a republican election agent. The association became quite popular in South Armagh and Down, and continued to support non-recognition of northern authorities.

Their sense of betrayal originated before the Boundary Commission, from the time of the Treaty. They lamented that Ulster constituencies were persuaded to nominate republican leaders for the elections in order to have a “special claim” on them in the event of a settlement with Britain.¹⁹⁸ However, the same candidates were returned unopposed for other constituencies in southern Ireland, and when they voted for the Treaty, they approved it as representatives of southern seats. The absence of Ulstermen in the Dáil had led to their betrayal and abandonment by the Free State. However, they insisted on boycotting the Belfast parliament since nationalist attendance would concede legitimacy to partition. Moreover, nationalists would not benefit from having their representatives taking seats, since they could only “secure a certain minor patronage for themselves, and perhaps assist in obtaining a few jobs occasionally for some of their Catholic friends”.¹⁹⁹ This was likely a reference to the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which worked as a patronage system providing jobs for its members. In the following years, the National Association gradually disappeared as it did not contest elections in 1929.

- **Conclusion**

The Boundary Commission had a negative impact on southern and northern politics alike. As a device to postpone the settlement of the Ulster question, it had the counterproductive effect of generating insecurity within both communities in the North, thus undermining an already difficult dialogue. On the nationalist side, it delayed the recognition of the authorities and fostered divisions not only between republicans and Devlinites, but also between border and north-eastern Catholics. It is possible that, without the prospect of border adjustments, recognition of the state of Northern Ireland would have come quicker,

¹⁹⁸ National Defence Association of Armagh and Down, *To the People of Ulster* (1925), p. 5.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

and nationalists' readiness to co-operate might have encouraged unionists to be more tolerant. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Eamon Phoenix, it is unlikely that a united nationalist and republican front could have prevented the implementation of discriminatory measures, such as gerrymandering.²⁰⁰ In any case, the Boundary Commission facilitated the maintenance of a connection between northern and southern nationalists that contributed to alienate the minority from the Belfast government.

On the other hand, the Commission worsened the relation between Ulster unionists and the British government. The former felt their existence under threat since they knew that their claim over Fermanagh and Tyrone was weak. The inevitability of the Commission encouraged them to strengthen their position by excluding nationalists from power in order to present as many unionist-controlled local bodies as possible.

The collapse of the Boundary Commission and the tripartite agreement represented the failure of the Free State northern policy. As the Labour TD John O'Farrell put it, northern nationalists were encouraged to withhold recognition of the Belfast parliament, acting as rebels in the state where they lived, only to be "left to make the best terms they could with those whom they had been led to believe had tyrannised over them".²⁰¹ However, the failure of the Commission did not prompt much self-criticism within the ranks of Cumann na nGaedheal, and after the approval of the tripartite agreement the party decided to ignore Northern Ireland. Since the failure of the Commission undermined the government's credibility, it contributed to strengthening Cosgrave's main opponent, Eamon de Valera. A few months after the end of the Commission, he founded a party, Fianna Fáil, which put the partition question at the centre of its policy, although it was never capable of devising an effective strategy to achieve unity.²⁰²

Reactions to the Commission's collapse were generally positive in the Free State, where most of the press welcomed the financial advantages of the final agreement. Public opinion appeared little interested in border adjustments, with the exception of those communities in Donegal and Monaghan which might have been affected. Local newspapers from border areas showed some degree of solidarity towards northern Catholics, but there was much

²⁰⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 335.

²⁰¹ *The Anglo-Celt*, 19 December 1925.

²⁰² C. O'Halloran, *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism* (Dublin, 1987), ch. 6.

more concern about territory loss than about gain. Although sporting organizations, the Trade Union Congress and the Catholic Church continued to operate on an all-Ireland basis, the failure of the Boundary Commission permanently established a psychological and political border.

The very nature of the Boundary Commission was controversial since it could not reconcile its task of border adjustments with the aspiration to national unity. This essential contradiction rarely emerged in clear terms, and even those who were aware of it, such as O'Shiel, continued to endorse it publicly. Even the most sceptical Devlinites did not dare to reject it, fearing to lose support in border areas. In fact, the Commission represented the best possibility of redemption for a significant section of the northern minority, and the preparations for the hearings hint that a part of northern Catholic business class and landowners wished for transfer. Despite widespread apathy, the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland was not completely alienated from politics, as a significant number of people volunteered for and took part in the preparations for the Commission. Their disappointment at the outcome of the proceedings generated different reactions in the medium and long term.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ANCIENT ORDER OF HIBERNIANS

- **Origins of the Order**

The Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) is generally described as an organisation whose members have sworn to protect the Roman Catholic faith and population in Ireland, a sort of Catholic version of the Protestant Orange Order. Its role changed across the centuries, and the Order gradually shifted from illegal secret society to the official organisation of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Today, the organisation is involved in philanthropic activities, and organises pilgrimages and religious celebrations. Forty-five divisions exist in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic, while the headquarters are in Derry.

Michael Foy's master's thesis, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians: an Irish political-religious pressure group, 1884-1975*, completed in 1976, is the main study of the organisation in Ireland, and it concentrates on the moment of its highest power and popularity under the leadership of Joe Devlin, between 1905 and 1914. Despite greater attention to this period, Foy does not omit the history of the Order from its uncertain origins in Ireland to the last branches surviving in Scotland in the mid-1970s. Another master's thesis completed over two decades after Foy's centres on the AOH in Monaghan. *The Ancient Order of Hibernians in county Monaghan with particular reference to the parish of Aghabog from 1900 to 1933*, by Seamus McPhillips, closely scrutinises the events that led to the decline of the association in one of its strongholds. McPhillips's work is particularly relevant for its analysis of the reasons why significant numbers of Catholics belonging to small communities in rural areas joined the Order.

Other monographs on the AOH tend to centre on branches established in the US by Irish immigrants from mid-nineteenth century, and only briefly deal with Ireland.¹ Like Foy, historians of nineteenth and twentieth century nationalism in Ulster, such as Eamon Phoenix and A. C. Hepburn, focus on the Order as the "personal political vehicle for Joe

¹ T. F. McGrath, *History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians* (Cleveland, 1898); J. O'Dea, *Amalgamated indices of history of Ancient Order of Hibernians and its Ladies' Auxiliary* (New York, 1923); G. R. Reilly, *Hibernians on the march: an examination of the origin and history of the Ancient Order of Hibernians with a program for the future* (San Francisco, 1948).

Devlin”.² Fergal McCluskey represents a significant exception in *Fenians and Ribbonmen* where he analyses the relation between Hibernians and Fenians in East Tyrone between 1898 and 1918.³ Whereas most historians focus on political activities, in his *History of Ireland* Sir James O’Connor, attorney general and personal friend of John Redmond, described the Order as a system of patronage, “a mischief to the state and to deserving Catholics as well”.⁴ O’Connor, himself a Catholic, asserted that the organisation’s main function was that of providing jobs for their members and assuring them preferential treatment within the community. Marianne Elliott confirms that in the early twentieth century in Belfast it was hard for workers to seek employment without the help of the Order.⁵

Another monograph on the AOH, *The Unknown Power behind the Irish Nationalist Party*, was published anonymously in 1907. It is attributed to Frederick Oliver Trench, 3rd Baron Ashtown, an Anglo-Irish landowner from county Galway and fierce opponent of Ireland’s independence.⁶ In his work, Ashtown appealed to the British government to stop Home Rule and save Ireland from the AOH, described as a disloyal organisation with “an evil history behind it, stained with treason, rebellion, and crimes of the darkest dye”.⁷ He linked Hibernianism with outrage in Ireland since the sixteenth century, and claimed that the Order was at the bottom of the pro-Home Rule United Irish League and of its project to drive British rule out of Ireland.

Ashtown’s urgent appeal was due to the rapid increase of the AOH’s power in the early twentieth century. This trend did not last long, and the organisation gradually lost influence within the Catholic population from 1916. Most historians overlook the Order when examining post-partition Irish politics. In Northern Ireland, the weakness of Devlin’s party and Catholic apathy marginalised the AOH as a political force, whereas the Hibernians’ exclusion from power at local and central level, due to the unionist strategy of neutralising

² A. C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934 in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), p. 90.

³ F. McCluskey, *Fenians and Ribbonmen: the development of Republican politics in East Tyrone, 1898-1918* (Manchester, 2011).

⁴ J. O’Connor, *History of Ireland, 1798-1924* (London, 1925), vol. 2, p. 184.

⁵ M. Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster* (London, 2000), p. 356.

⁶ P. Maume, ‘Trench, Frederick Oliver’, DIB.

⁷ F. O. Trench, *The Unknown Power behind the Irish Nationalist Party* (London, 1907), p. 2.

nationalism, compromised their ability to provide jobs for members of the Order. In the Free State, although Hibernian branches survived in border counties and its Insurance Society was popular, the Order did not attach itself to any party, thus being excluded from political controversy.

However, as an all-Ireland organisation, the AOH assured the maintenance of cross-border relations since Hibernians travelled across the border to attend demonstrations, meeting fellow members from both the Irish states, and listening to political discourses about Northern Ireland and the Free State. The *Hibernian Journal*, the official publication of the AOH, was regularly read during meetings, and it kept audiences north and south informed about the situation of their neighbours. Moreover, analysis of Hibernian activities and publications suggests that the AOH contributed to maintaining some degree of political involvement among northern Catholics, despite their growing alienation. As the official organisation of the Nationalist Party of Northern Ireland, it provided Catholics with locations and opportunities for political discussion.

Foy and McPhillips lament the scarcity of sources for the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Joe Devlin, National President from 1905 to 1934, had his papers burned after his death. Foy claims that Hibernian records prior to 1922 were destroyed during the Civil War, and that he was refused access to those kept since that date. Although the organisation is still in existence, Henry McCabe, the current National President of the AOH, has not provided any information about archival material. The main sources for the period under analysis in this chapter are the press (some local papers often reported Hibernian activities) the *Hibernian Journal*, and police records of the Order's activities in Northern Ireland. Partial records of the yearly meetings of the supreme body governing the organisation, the Board of Erin, shed some light on the AOH priorities and internal issues. Since the organisation was registered as a friendly society, a few surviving annual returns of Hibernian divisions provide partial information about membership, its financial situation and activities to raise funds.

As already mentioned, the origins of the organisation are uncertain. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the name "Ancient Order of Hibernians" came into use, its members claimed that it had been in existence for centuries. The choice of the adjective "ancient" and the use of the Latin name for "Irish people" might be interpreted as an attempt to recall the antiquity of the Order. At the time, Latin was the language used by the

Church, and the term “Hibernians” could have been chosen to stress the Catholic character of the organisation.

Most sources date the creation of the Order back to the Plantation days, although it is likely that efforts to identify the precise moment and place of the AOH’s birth were inspired by the desire to emulate the Orange Order. The first Orange lodge was founded in 1795 after a clash between Protestant and Catholic gangs at a cross road called the Diamond, near Loughgall in county Armagh.⁸ Catholic gangs identified themselves as “Defenders”. They were a “secret organisation of lower-class Catholics” and, according to Hibernian tradition, the group later evolved in the AOH.⁹ Like the Orange Order, the Defenders adopted practices such as marches, mottoes and oaths of allegiance, and were organised in lodges. In more recent times, Hibernian banners were similar to Orange ones, but represented the Pope and Catholic martyrs instead of Protestant heroes, while the music style was identical, although with different tunes.¹⁰ This contributed to interpretations of the Hibernians as the Catholic counterpart of the Orange Order.

In the early twentieth century, Hibernians claimed that the Order was founded in 1565 by Rory Oge O’More, a warlord of Laois who rebelled against the planters.¹¹ This assertion was based on oral tradition, and it appears to be motivated by a need to identify, or invent, a “foundation myth” conferring prestige and legitimacy to the organisation as the Battle of the Diamond did for the Orange Order. In 1925, the *Hibernian Journal* suggested that the origins of the AOH might date back to the pre-Christian era when, around the year 1300 BC, the mythical king Munemon reigned over Ireland.¹² According to the paper, it was possible to identify “the originals of the constitution, purposes and brotherhood of the Order as it exists today” in the rules and ceremonies of the Knights of the Golden Chain. Apart from such anachronistic claims, it appears likely that the AOH evolved from secret societies involved in agrarian turbulence and sectarian clashes.

⁸ J. Smyth, *The Men of No Property* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 110.

⁹ M. Elliott, *Wolfe Tone. Prophet of Irish Independence* (Yale University, 1989), p. 63.

¹⁰ R. Cecil, “The marching season in Northern Ireland: an expression of politico-religious identity”, in S. MacDonald, *Inside European Identities* (Oxford, 1993), p. 162.

¹¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, February 1924.

¹² *The Hibernian Journal*, February 1925.

In the twentieth century, Hibernians prided themselves of having supported the United Irishmen and later the Ribbonmen. The Society of the United Irishmen was founded in 1791 by Wolfe Tone, an Anglican barrister who urged the co-operation of all different creeds in Ireland to obtain parliamentary reforms. At first, Tone tried to ensure the Defenders' support for liberal reforms and discouraged their involvement in sectarian clashes.¹³ After the failure to win complete Catholic emancipation due to the opposition of Protestant landlords and magistrates, Tone and his followers turned to armed rebellion and attempted to establish an Irish republic through the 1798 uprising. In parallel, the Defenders spread from Ulster to the midlands and the West. The Catholic character of the organisation waxed, and revolutionary aspirations replaced their commitment to parliamentary reforms. In 1797, 15,000 Defenders were ready to support the French invasion of Ireland.¹⁴

In contrast, Ribbonmen never meant to overthrow the government. Born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they protected tenants from landlords' evictions, and were often involved in clashes with the Orange Order. A connection, and possibly a partial identification, of Hibernians and Ribbonmen appears likely for various reasons. The movements presented a similar organisation in local lodges and, at least initially, they lacked central direction and power: they did not have intellectual and political leaders such as Wolfe Tone and Thomas Russell for the United Irishmen. Moreover, they had a specifically religious character and emerged within a context of sectarian confrontation: indeed, most of the battles and fighting involving Ribbonmen were clashes with Orangemen taking place in Ulster. The identification of the two societies is also confirmed by police reports of the 1880s referring to them as "the AOH or Ribbon Society".¹⁵

According to Hibernian tradition, the Defenders stood as bodyguards of haunted priests saying mass at the time of Penal Laws. Hibernians regarded themselves as protectors of the Catholic population from Protestant rule, and thus it is not surprising that Hibernianism became stronger in Ulster, where Irish Protestants were concentrated since the seventeenth century Plantation, than in the rest of Ireland. The Catholic character of the organisation remained the foundation of the Order, whereas its involvement in agrarian

¹³ M. Elliott, *Wolfe Tone. Prophet of Irish Independence* (Yale University, 1989), pp. 181-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

¹⁵ M. T. Foy, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians: an Irish political-religious pressure group, 1884-1975* (Queen's University Belfast Master thesis, 1976), p. 11.

agitation decreased in the second half of the nineteenth century, in parallel with the growing industrialisation of Ulster. Nevertheless, police reports asserted that Ulster remained the stronghold of Hibernianism: in 1892, the majority of the 121 branches of the Order in Ireland was concentrated in the north, and the sole county Armagh counted over 1,000 of the total 6,000 members.¹⁶ Outside Ulster, the AOH was believed to exist only in Sligo (100 members) and Leitrim (200 members). Interestingly, the lowest membership was reported in county Down (70 members).

Despite its numerical strength, the Order had a loose and inefficient organisation: local lodges were often autonomous from the central power, to the point that they used their own passwords. The supreme governing body, the Board of Erin, was composed by “a group of men, changing in composition, which would meet four times a year to have a general chat”.¹⁷ The Board generally met in Belfast, although the first mention of the Order in the town, according to Hepburn, dates to 1899.¹⁸ However weak and disorganised, the Order retained two important functions: it provided social entertainment (most Hibernian branches had halls where they held balls and plays, and locals went to play cards and pool) and welfare benefits to its members. As McPhillips argues, people became Hibernians to escape the weariness of rural life, because of family connections, as a way to express support for Home Rule, and contempt towards the Orange Order.¹⁹ At this stage, the secret character of the organisation had disappeared.

Although social entertainment and welfare guaranteed the Order’s survival, they also provoked tensions between rural and urban branches. The latter wanted the AOH to register under the 1896 Friendly Societies Act in order to improve its functioning as a benefit society, whereas the former opposed this because it would require members to pay regular contributions.²⁰ Internal friction and lack of organisation weakened the Order, which struggled to compete with rival societies recruiting from the Catholic community, such as

¹⁶ M. T. Foy, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians: an Irish political-religious pressure group, 1884-1975* (Queen’s University Belfast Master thesis, 1976), p. 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ A. C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934 in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), p. 91.

¹⁹ S. McPhillips, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians in county Monaghan with particular reference to the Parish of Aghabog from 1900 to 1933* (National University of Ireland Maynooth, Master thesis, 1999), p. 34.

²⁰ A. C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934 in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), p. 92.

the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). Although non-sectarian in its constitution, the IRB mainly appealed to Catholics, and thus became the first rival of the AOH.

- **The Order in the early twentieth century**

At the end of 1890, Parnell's National League split in two rival factions that reunited to form the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) only in 1900. Under the leadership of John Redmond, the party authorised the United Irish League (UIL), advocating land reforms, to act as official nationalist organisation. Joe Devlin, member of the UIL National Directory, was put in charge of its establishment in Ulster. The League rapidly extended all across Ireland, but despite Devlin's efforts, it did not become as popular in the North as in the rest of the country. This was likely due to the fact that Ulster, and in particular its north-east corner, was more industrialised than the rest of Ireland. An agrarian-based association could hardly establish itself there. Moreover, social conflict in Ulster had a sectarian connotation, and non-religious organisations might have little appeal. Conscious of that, Devlin turned to the AOH for strengthening the IPP. He was himself a member of the Order since 1893, but had never been prominent in the association until, in the first years of the twentieth century, he sought to take control and bind it up with the UIL and the IPP.

In July 1905, at the national convention of the AOH in Dublin, Devlin was elected National President, while John Nugent, his personal friend, already manager of the British Legal Assurance Company and member of the Board of Erin, became Secretary.²¹ The convention passed a resolution approving "the great national work done in the interest of Ireland by the pledge-bound IPP and recognising that the overwhelming vote of our countrymen has declared in favour of the UIL as the national organisation".²² This resolution inextricably bound the Order to the Irish Parliamentary Party.

The national convention reorganised the Order in ordinary divisions generally coinciding with parishes and identified by a number. County committees, formed by an elected delegate from each division, elected a president, a treasurer, a secretary, and a chaplain.

²¹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast 1994), pp. 4-5.

²² *Irish News*, 22 July 1925.

County committees elected provincial councils: Ulster, Munster, Connaught, Leinster, Scotland, England, and Wales. Finally, the Board of Erin was composed by a national president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, three trustees, and provisional delegates elected by provincial councils. All of them were elected at a national convention held every two years.²³

Between 1905 and 1909, the Order expanded from 10,000 members to 60,000, and later became an approved society under the National Insurance Act of 1911.²⁴ The Act enabled different organisations, such as trade unions and friendly societies, to open an insurance section on a non-profit basis. In Ireland, only the AOH and the National Foresters qualified for the administration allowance from public funds. The AOH took advantage of the opportunity and, by 1914, its insurance branch had almost 170,000 members, around one-quarter of the insurable Catholic population.²⁵ The following year, 1,800 divisions were registered in Ireland, with around 100,000 full members and 200,000 insurance members.²⁶ The latter received welfare assistance under a contributory system of insurance against illness and unemployment. This allowed the Order to expand in urban areas where it attracted great numbers of insurance members from the working class. Although Ulster remained its stronghold, it became popular in North Connaught and Dublin. In 1910, a women's branch of the AOH, the Ladies' Auxiliaries, was established, and in four years' time, hundreds of divisions existed in Ireland.²⁷ Their activities were not publicized to the same degree as male divisions, and generally consisted in philanthropic initiatives in favour of the poor. Most Ladies' Auxiliaries divisions were concentrated in Dublin and Belfast, where the top floor of the Falls road premises was reserved to them.²⁸

Since it officially supported the IPP, the AOH was committed to constitutional methods. Nevertheless, it was often involved in violent clashes with the Orange Order, thus becoming popular among young men who, according to police reports, were attracted by its manifest

²³ M. T. Foy, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians: an Irish political-religious pressure group, 1884-1975* (Queen's University Belfast Master thesis, 1976), p. 55.

²⁴ J. Loughlin, 'Devlin, Joseph', DIB.

²⁵ A. C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart*, (Belfast, 1996), p. 166.

²⁶ A. C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934 in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), p. 96.

²⁷ S. Paseta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 64.

²⁸ *The Hibernian Journal*, May 1920.

hostility towards Protestants.²⁹ Parades often degenerated into confrontations, and Hibernians not only gained the reputation of “hard men”, but also of violent drunkards who used to fire shots and smash windows on their way home from demonstrations.³⁰ Hibernian leaders did not sanction this kind of behaviour, but it is not clear that they actively discouraged it. It is likely that they tolerated it to some extent in order to recruit young people.

However, Hibernians did not only confront Orangemen. The Order was conservative from a political and social point of view, and it often “provided (...) business contacts and quickly developed as a patronage and brokerage machine to ensure that preferential treatment was given to its members in the labour market”.³¹ It organised networks of clientelism transcending social classes and linking rural with urban areas. Hibernians vehemently opposed socialism since they considered it as a divisive force threatening the unity of Irish nationalists. They occasionally interfered with socialist demonstrations, such as in March 1911, in Queenstown (today known as Cobh, county Cork), when they interrupted a meeting addressed by James Connolly, leader of the Socialist Party, and chased him out of town.³² The AOH’s involvement in anti-trade union activities leads Austen Morgan to assert that it “contributed to the division of the working class in Belfast and Ireland as a whole”.³³ Membership of the Order steadily increased until 1914. At the start of the war, the third Home Rule Bill was enacted together with an act suspending its application until the end of the hostilities. In order to secure the future implementation of self-government, the IPP endorsed the war effort, and Hibernians were encouraged to join the British Army. This proved counterproductive since enlistment in the British Army was unpopular among Irish nationalists.

Although the Home Rule Bill was on the Statute Book, negotiations on its implementation continued during the war years, in an attempt to find an agreement over the exclusion of Ulster. At the start of June 1916, David Lloyd George, Secretary of State for War, proposed a scheme envisaging self-government for all Ireland except the six Ulster counties of Antrim,

²⁹ A. C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and Nationalist Ireland in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934 in the Era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), p. 94.

³⁰ T. K. Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence* (Oxford, 2010), p. 127.

³¹ R. Rees, *Ireland 1905-25, Text and Historiography* (Newtownards, 1998), vol. 1, p.71

³² C. Desmond Greaves, *The life and times of James Connolly* (London, 1961), p. 207.

³³ A. Morgan, *Labour and Partition: the Belfast working class, 1905-23* (London, 1991), p. 41.

Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Derry and Tyrone, which were to be administered by Westminster. Lloyd George persuaded John Redmond that the settlement was only temporary, and the nationalist leadership resolved to accept the proposal, despite widespread disagreement in the North. In Omagh, local priests and George Murnaghan senior, nationalist MP until 1910, organised a meeting to demand the IPP's opposition to any form of temporary or permanent partition. Several Hibernians approved the resolution.

However, a meeting of around 2,000 Belfast nationalists supported the party's acceptance of the Lloyd George proposal, with only 20 dissenting votes.³⁴ The attitude of Tyrone nationalists was more representative of Catholic opinion in the six counties, since Belfast support for Lloyd George's proposal owed much to the great popularity that Devlin enjoyed there. Finally, on 23 June, a conference of northern nationalists approved the Lloyd George proposal, and all 37 Hibernians representatives voted in favour of the resolution, in accordance with the IPP line. It is possible that the most sceptical Hibernians did not attend the conference: there were only three representatives from Tyrone and one from Fermanagh, while thirteen attended from Belfast and nine from Derry.³⁵

In parallel with the decline of the IPP in the years following the Easter Rising, membership of the AOH decreased. Constitutional nationalism's main competitor, Sinn Féin, gained popularity in the six counties thanks to its opposition to any form of partition. Sinn Féin and the AOH had always been antagonistic since they "represented entirely different emotional and intellectual conceptions of what Irish nationality meant".³⁶ At the end of 1916, there were 36 Sinn Féin clubs in Tyrone, with a membership of 2,135, while the AOH, which in June counted 3,031 members, was described by the RIC as "inactive".³⁷ Several Hibernians "defected" to republicanism, meetings were cancelled and entire divisions suppressed. When in February 1917, Count Plunkett, father of one of the executed leaders of the Easter Rising, defeated the Hibernian candidate at the Roscommon by-election, a number of AOH divisions congratulated Plunkett.³⁸ This episode shows the degree of ideological

³⁴ D. Miller, *Church, State and Nation in Ireland, 1998-1921* (Dublin, 1973), pp. 335-6.

³⁵ PRONI, T3321/2 (Printed report of the Ulster Nationalist Conference held in St. Mary's Hall, Belfast, on 23 June 1916).

³⁶ A. C. Hepburn, *A Past Apart* (Belfast, 1996), p. 163.

³⁷ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 44.

³⁸ M. T. Foy, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians: an Irish political-religious pressure group, 1884-1975* (Queen's University Belfast Master thesis, 1976), p. 148.

independence from Devlin and the IPP that a significant number of divisions moved to after 1916, and well represents the political shift taking place in Ireland.

Hibernians who remained loyal to the Order tended to see a socialist revolutionary threat in Sinn Féin rhetoric, and strongly opposed the establishment of a republic.³⁹ Throughout the Ulster countryside, during the 1918 electoral campaign, clashes between Hibernians and republicans became widespread, in a spiral of retaliation involving the burning of halls and seizure of pipes and drums, violent clashes, and mutual intimidation. Organised mobs of Hibernians broke up meetings and attacked Sinn Féin speakers with sticks and stones, while republicans repeatedly assaulted the Order's premises.

- **Hibernians and Sinn Féiners**

As a large number of Hibernians shifted from the IPP to Sinn Féin, some of the rank-and-file joined the IRA and engaged in the defence of Catholics in Belfast and Derry.⁴⁰ Although it is hard to estimate the frequency of this phenomenon, it is likely that some young Hibernians who used to confront Orange crowds were now attracted by the war against the British carried on by the IRA. It is not clear if they became involved in attacks against Hibernians, or engaged in activities of intimidation against those who remained loyal to the Order.

The growing strength of Sinn Féin led Hibernians to be the victims more often than they were the offenders. The first fatality occurred in December 1918 at Glenties fair (Donegal), where parties of Hibernians and Sinn Féiners engaged in violent confrontation and fired shots in the air. Anthony Heron, a local farmer and IPP supporter, was shot in the neck and died.⁴¹ It seems that Heron's death resulted from an accident, as he was not targeted by Sinn Féiners.

Ill-feeling between the two groups increased with the start of the Anglo-Irish War. Since Hibernians opposed revolutionary movements and condemned the killing of policemen, republicans generally distrusted them, and often accused them of reporting information to

³⁹ Ibid., p. 150.

⁴⁰ T. K. Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence* (Oxford, 2010), p. 130.

⁴¹ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 21 December 1918.

the RIC.⁴² When Devlin started to campaign in defence of IRA prisoners, he caused resentment among those who had remained loyal to the AOH after the start of the First World War. In March 1921, an anonymous member of the Order wrote to Devlin asking why he defended republicans after what they had done in Monaghan, where they had killed a young man “for no other reason than that he was a staunch Hibernian”.⁴³

Despite this claim, it seems that Francis McPhillips, the young victim, was not killed for being an Hibernian, but for passing information to the RIC, a fact that appears to have been widely known in the area.⁴⁴ One month before his death, he was kidnapped and tied up to Aghabog church gate and labelled as a spy in order to have the congregation see him on Sunday morning.⁴⁵ Shortly after that, as John McGonnell, IRA Captain, recalled in his statement to the Bureau of Military History, two Volunteers dressed up as police officers approached McPhillips asking for information about local republicans. McPhillips, ignorant of their true identity, told them everything he knew. On 9 March 1921, he was taken from his home, court-martialled and executed at a place called Latnamard, in the Aghabog parish. In his statement, McGonnell did not mention the AOH.⁴⁶

McPhillips was the second of three Hibernians killed by the IRA in county Monaghan between 1920 and 1921. The first, Michael O’Brien from Dromod, died in early December 1920, three weeks after being shot. According to the result of the military inquiry, O’Brien was walking home with some friends on the night of 13 November when they passed two men who appeared to be preparing an ambush. As O’Brien recognised one of them and shouted his name, the man shot him. O’Brien was not executed: he was shot because he had involuntarily witnessed Sinn Féiners’ activities and had identified one of the men. McPhillips’ and O’Brien’s involvement with the AOH did not cause their deaths, although a witness heard during the military inquiry asserted that, because of his membership of the AOH, O’Brien was unpopular “with a certain section of the community”.⁴⁷

⁴² F. McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy* (Oxford, 2005), p. 68.

⁴³ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 118.

⁴⁴ S. McPhillips, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians in county Monaghan with particular reference to the Parish of Aghabog from 1900 to 1933* (National University of Ireland Maynooth, Master thesis, 1999) p. 107.

⁴⁵ *The Anglo-Celt*, 23 April 1921.

⁴⁶ Statement by John McGonnell, BMH, p. 7.

⁴⁷ *The Anglo-Celt*, 15 January 1921.

Unlike the last Hibernian victim, Arthur Treanor, McPhillips and O'Brien were not prominent in the Order. Treanor, in contrast, was vice-president of the Hibernian county board and president of his district board, as well as member of the local Board of Guardians and a rural district councillor. His execution received a lot of coverage and was remembered by several ex-IRA men in their statements to the Bureau. Joseph McKenna recalled a raid on a mail car that resulted in the discovery of a letter from Dublin Castle to Arthur Treanor. The letter contained a cheque as payment for the information provided by Treanor to the British forces. McKenna did not mention that Treanor was an Hibernian but described him as a British supporter.⁴⁸ Francis O'Duffy, IRA Captain and Chairman of the Monaghan Dáil Courts, recalled that at a Sinn Féin meeting in Carrickroe (Monaghan) during the 1918 electoral campaign, a crowd led by Arthur Treanor refused a hearing to the speakers. It seems that Treanor was particularly annoyed by the fact that the main speaker was a priest, as he reminded him of the "Render unto Cesar" text. O'Duffy described Treanor as "a rather excitable, rabid type", without mentioning his Hibernian membership.⁴⁹

Since hostility between the remaining supporters of the IPP and republicans was widespread, those who released statements to the Bureau were generally biased against constitutional nationalists, who are often described as opportunistic and mercenary.⁵⁰ Moreover, since O'Duffy and McGonnell were involved in the execution of Treanor and McPhillips, it is reasonable to assume that they were eager to describe the two Hibernians as traitors who deserved to be executed. As McPhillips, Treanor was executed for passing information to the British, although the latter does not seem to have been regarded as a spy by people in his area.

T. K. Wilson asserts that a fourth Hibernian was killed by the IRA in Monaghan: Henry Carr, a farmer from Corvoy, was executed as a spy in spring 1921.⁵¹ As in the case of McPhillips, a witness claimed in his statement to the Bureau that Carr was interviewed by IRA men disguised as British soldiers, and he revealed to them all he knew about republicans in his area. Although Carr was a die-hard Redmondite, there is no evidence that he officially

⁴⁸ Statement by Joseph H. McKenna, BMH, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Statement by Francis O'Duffy, BMH, p. 11-12.

⁵⁰ F. McGarry, 'Too many histories? The Bureau of Military History and Easter 1916', *History Ireland*, Vol. 19, No.6 (Nov. 2011), p. 28.

⁵¹ T. K. Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence* (Oxford, 2010), p. 129.

belonged to the AOH, nor was his death ever commemorated by the Order. However, nationalist supporters were likely sympathisers of the AOH, and it is possible that they were members of divisions that became inactive during the war. The Order was strong in Monaghan where it counted 45 divisions in 1921.⁵² Sinn Féin was popular too, as the first club was founded there as early as 1908.⁵³ After the start of the war, the Order lost popularity in the county, but its decline was less sharp than elsewhere.⁵⁴

Among the three Hibernians killed in Monaghan, it was Treanor who became the hero. In October 1921, the National Secretary of the Order, John Nugent, wrote to de Valera complaining about republican violence against Hibernians, and in November he sent a letter to the Sinn Féin Minister for Defence, Cathal Brugha, denouncing the murder of O'Brien and Treanor.⁵⁵ Presumably, he did not mention McPhillips because he was widely held to be a spy. The fact that Treanor was the most prominent among the Hibernian victims is confirmed by the fact that only four years after his death, the Order unveiled a memorial over his grave in Carrickroe, and organised a demonstration in his memory at his home village, Emyvale. According to the *Hibernian Journal*, 12,000 people attended the demonstration.⁵⁶

It was not until 1931 that Hibernians erected a celtic cross in memory of Michael O'Brien, whereas a memorial was unveiled on McPhillips' grave in 1933.⁵⁷

Open confrontation between Hibernians and republicans was rare during the War of Independence, and the three Monaghan killings represented an exception in the history of relations between the Order and the IRA. This history, although characterised by antagonism, saw occasional co-operation. In January 1920, the town of Ballyjamesduff in Cavan was "ringing with music from the local AOH and Sinn Féin brass bands".⁵⁸ In Clones

⁵² S. McPhillips, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians in county Monaghan with particular reference to the Parish of Aghabog from 1900 to 1933*, Master thesis, National University of Ireland Maynooth, p. 11.

⁵³ P. Livingstone, *The Monaghan Story* (Enniskillen, 1980), p. 363.

⁵⁴ F. McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy* (Oxford, 2005), p. 68.

⁵⁵ S. McPhillips, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians in county Monaghan with particular reference to the Parish of Aghabog from 1900 to 1933* (National University of Ireland Maynooth, Master thesis, 1999) p. 111.

⁵⁶ *The Hibernian Journal*, June 1925.

⁵⁷ *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1931; S. McPhillips, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians in county Monaghan with particular reference to the Parish of Aghabog from 1900 to 1933* (National University of Ireland Maynooth, Master thesis, 1999) p. 21.

⁵⁸ *The Anglo-Celt*, 10 January 1920.

(Monaghan), IRA men were greeted by an Hibernian band as they arrived at the train station.⁵⁹ But such cases remained isolated.

There were recurrent episodes involving the seizure of musical instruments by ex-Hibernians who claimed they were their personal property and did not belong to the Order.⁶⁰ Whereas physical violence was unusual, intimidation was widespread, and took different forms. In a number of cases, masked men visited houses warning against dealings with “certain parties”, and informed that Hibernian activities were no longer tolerated in the area.⁶¹ Although the majority of the population in Ireland had turned from the IPP to Sinn Féin, and membership of the Order was declining, it is possible that, particularly in rural areas, Hibernian events such as balls and concerts continued to be popular due to the scarcity of alternative entertainments. In the countryside, Hibernian halls were often the only space where events could take place, and they were occasionally rented by different associations and charities. In some cases, Hibernian divisions received applications for the use of their halls from Sinn Féin clubs. Despite tensions between the two factions, Hibernian halls were community spaces that not only members of the Order, but local Catholics in general used to attend.⁶²

This is likely one of the reasons why Hibernian halls became a target of republican attacks during the war, and in the years following partition. By June 1922, the number of Hibernian halls burned or blown up in Ireland reached 210, 75 of which were in the six counties.⁶³ Attacks were confined to rural districts, never being attempted in larger centres, and generally happened the night before a ball or another important event was due to be held, when the hall was empty. Only once did a fire exchange between Hibernians and Sinn Féiners precede the burning of a hall. After Gweedore hall (Donegal) was attacked twice, the Order decided to keep a guard of five men. On the night of 9 June 1920, a party of between two and three hundred armed men attacked the hall from all sides. The five Hibernians kept up a defensive fire until their ammunition was exhausted, then they were routed and the

⁵⁹ *The Irish News*, 10 March 1922.

⁶⁰ *The Anglo-Celt*, 13 May 1922.

⁶¹ *The Anglo-Celt*, 28 February 1920.

⁶² *The Hibernian Journal*, February 1920.

⁶³ S. McPhillips, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians in county Monaghan with particular reference to the Parish of Aghabog from 1900 to 1933* (National University of Ireland Maynooth, Master thesis, 1999) p. 109.

hall was burned to the ground. This was the third attack in six weeks.⁶⁴ It is likely that, after the first two failed attempts at destroying the hall, republicans felt the need to assert their power unequivocally, and decided to engage a disproportionate number of men in the assault in order to show their strength.

In some cases, the attacks were not carefully planned, and the *Hibernian Journal* did not miss the opportunity to ridicule the enemy. In spring 1920, several houses were raided for arms in Leitrim. One night, masked men tried to break into the house of Francis McGloin, secretary to the Hibernian county board. McGloin woke up, grabbed his rifle and fired a shot in the air. The *Journal* reported that “the heroes then rushed from the house and along the road, firing two revolver shots as they ran. Mr McGloin fired two further shots in the air, and then returned to bed. (...) What brave fellows those champions of liberty are, to be sure!”⁶⁵ In general, the *Journal* described attacks as vicious and republicans as cowards and fools, constantly stressing the inconsistency between Sinn Féin’s advocating free speech, and IRA’s methods.

The IRA did not always attack Hibernian halls to destroy them. Between 1919 and 1922, a number of halls were seized by republicans who claimed their right to use them as true representatives of the nationalist community. Seizures generally took place according to the same “ritual” everywhere: a group of republicans forcibly entered the hall at night as an entertainment was taking place, and claimed their right to take possession of the place. The *Hibernian Journal* described this modus operandi as republicans’ “usual game of bounce, viz. “jump” the hall, and claim, as a right, to use it”.⁶⁶ The case of a hall belonging to Gortin division, situated in the townland of Fallagh (Tyrone), properly illustrates this dynamic.

On Easter Monday 1919, a group of between eighty and one hundred men rushed into Fallagh hall as a ball was taking place. One of the assailants read a declaration: “we, the parishioners of Lower Badoney, having subscribed and paid for the erection of this hall (...) leased as parochial property, same having being usurped and claimed by (...) the AOH, are here tonight to assert our rights as parishioners, and take over this hall as our rightful

⁶⁴ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 12 June 1920.

⁶⁵ *The Hibernian Journal*, May 1920.

⁶⁶ *The Hibernian Journal*, January 1920.

property”.⁶⁷ After that, they allowed fifteen minutes to clear the hall, discouraging the ball’s attendants from resisting. The Sunday after the raid, during the mass, the local priest Fr Healy appointed a parish committee to administer the hall. Hibernians were never allowed to enter the hall again, and their property was not returned. However, two of the Hibernian trustees claimed lawful ownership of the hall on behalf of the Order, and sued Fr Healy and the parish committee. The trial to identify the legal owners of the hall, which concluded in July 1921, received wide coverage in the press. John Skeffington, Secretary to the AOH county board, appeared for the plaintiffs, whereas the defendants’ solicitors were the already mentioned George Murnaghan junior and Alex Donnelly, who would be appointed local agent in Tyrone by the North-Eastern Boundary Bureau.

As was recalled during the trial, the hall had been built in 1908, but the name “Ancient Order of Hibernians” did not appear on the lease, on which was read “parochial hall”. This was due to the fact that the owner of the land on which Hibernians meant to build their hall opposed the Order. Thus, they decided to put on the lease the names of the local priest and of two members who were not prominent in the organisation. After that, Hibernians organised a hall committee and collected the money for the construction. Not only members of the Order, but the majority of Catholics in the area contributed to the fund. This was normal since, as different witnesses stressed, “at the time the hall was built, there was no trouble in the district, and no Sinn Féin”, and “there was no other organisation in the district except the UIL”.

It appears that these considerations persuaded His Honour Judge Linehan to decide the verdict for the AOH at Omagh Equity session in July 1921. In fact, he recognised that “The Ancient Order of Hibernians was the political body that had the full confidence of that section of the population [Catholic] and the project to obtain the hall for lay purposes (...) would naturally have the assent of all the members of the Catholic body, lay and clerical”.⁶⁸ It was well known that subscriptions to the hall fund would ultimately reach the AOH, and therefore the fact that non-members donated, did not imply that the hall belonged to the whole community or to the parish.

⁶⁷ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 23 April 1921.

⁶⁸ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 2 July 1921.

The seizure of Fallagh hall and the following trial exemplify the political shift that took place after 1914. As long as the IPP maintained its political hegemony, the AOH had a monopoly on public life in rural Ulster. After Sinn Féin gained almost unanimous support among Catholics, it sought to replace the Order in its social role. However, the men who seized Fallagh hall on Easter Monday night were described as foreigners during the trial. This suggests that Sinn Féin did not enjoy enough support from the community of Lower Badoney, as the success of the Hibernian ball seems to confirm, and sought help from outside.

It is likely that, although Catholics had turned to republicanism, they did not stop attending Hibernian events since they did not consider them to have any political character. As already mentioned, non-members were regularly admitted to Hibernian entertainments. In their statement on the night of Easter Monday, Sinn Féiners accused the AOH of having “usurped” the hall, but they did not complain about any section of the population being excluded from using it. It is likely that most extreme republicans and volunteers refused to attend Hibernian events, but there is no evidence suggesting that the Order refused access to Sinn Féin supporters in Fallagh. In Cloonturk (Leitrim), when Hibernians received an application for the use of their hall from the local Sinn Féin club, they agreed only on the conditions that the space would not be used for political purposes, and that no republican expressions would be employed.⁶⁹ It appears that republicans did not agree on these conditions as they burned the hall shortly afterwards.

Although republicans regularly targeted Hibernian halls, it seems that they lacked a consistent strategy in this respect. Most of the halls were burned or wrecked, but in several cases, Sinn Féiners claimed their possession. Hibernian halls were not only a “symbol” of the IPP’s lost power that had to be violently eliminated, but also a community space, often the only one Catholics had in their locality. It was the duality of the AOH as political organisation and provider of social entertainment that explains how republican hostility was manifested in different ways.

Halls continued to be a matter of contention between Sinn Féiners and Hibernians until the mid-1920s. In Castlewellan (Down) in May 1923, a land mine exploded under the floor of the

⁶⁹ *The Leitrim Observer*, 20 March 1920.

local hall, blowing off the roof and completely wrecking the interior of the building; Ardara hall in Donegal was burned in June 1924, shortly after the Order had recovered its possession from Sinn Féin.⁷⁰ As the Order slowly regained power, in parallel with Sinn Féin decline, it claimed back a number of halls that were seized by republicans.

Old rancour still opposed the two factions, as emerged during the trial to establish the possession of Mounstewart hall (Tyrone), in summer 1925. Nine years before, in 1916, some members of the Hibernian division were suspended for publishing “a resolution of a nature calculated to result in disunion in their ranks”.⁷¹ Among them, Owen McCusker, the local AOH treasurer, had since refused to return the key of the premises, arguing that he represented the majority of his division that was entitled to the use of the hall. However, as in Fallagh case, the Judge found in favour of the plaintiffs on the basis that the defendants had no rights over the lands. One week after the case was heard, Owen McCusker wrote to the editor of the *Ulster Herald* proposing a plebiscite of all the members and ex-members of the Hibernian division as to whether the hall should remain parochial property or “the haunt of a few politicians who represent no more but themselves”.⁷² He received no reply.

Republican violence and intimidation contributed to the decline in popularity that the Order suffered after 1914 and, in particular, in the early 1920s. However, as republicanism weakened in Northern Ireland and in the Free State, Hibernianism did not recover the prominent position occupied until the First World War. Politics and society in Ireland had undergone dramatic changes that the organisation was unable to interpret.

- **The Order and unionism**

In September 1920, the Order’s national secretary John Nugent wrote on the *Hibernian Journal*:

the man in the street must feel sorely puzzled on reading in one column of his newspaper that Hibernian halls are burned in such places, for instance, as Cavan, by people who regard our organisation as not being extreme enough in its advocacy of the

⁷⁰ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 19 May 1923; *The Hibernian Journal*, July 1924.

⁷¹ *The Ulster Herald*, 25 July 1925.

⁷² *The Ulster Herald*, 8 August 1925.

national cause, and turning to the next column finds that our halls have been destroyed in Lisburn and elsewhere by Orangemen who regard us as being too extremely nationalist.

Although Hibernians found themselves under attack from republican and loyalist forces, the former inflicted greater losses. Violent confrontation with Orangemen characterised the history of the Order, but there is no evidence confirming Nugent's claim about Hibernian halls being targeted in the early 1920s. However, it is possible, if not likely, that loyalist crowds attacked them, along with other symbols of Catholicism such as churches and convents, during summer 1920.

As sectarian violence became widespread, the *Journal* started discussing the creation of an Order's brigade "for the defence of the lives and property of Catholics in North-East Ulster".⁷³ In November 1920, Nugent announced that the Board of Erin had agreed to establish a volunteer corps, and that membership of the AOH was not a necessary qualification for admission since as many as possible who had military training should enrol. In the event, no Hibernian brigade was ever formed, as confirmed by the *Journal* more than two years later. When the paper recalled the brigade project, it gave a very different account of the events, stating that the Order came under pressure from its members to sanction a defensive corps in response to republican attacks.⁷⁴ Nugent discouraged such initiative and opened correspondence with republican leaders demanding a cessation of attacks. After the Treaty split, he finally obtained from Collins a repudiation of violence against Hibernians. The *Journal* denied that the Board of Erin had repeatedly encouraged the formation of a paramilitary group within its ranks, and claimed that the proposal came from a few members of the Order in response to republican violence, not to sectarian attacks.

After partition, Hibernians repeatedly stressed their commitment to constitutional means in an attempt to distance themselves from republicanism, but unionist authorities remained suspicious of the Order. In summer 1922, the police searched the Order's premises in Belfast and arrested a Hibernian, Thomas McCrory, for possession of a book allegedly showing membership of the IRA as its records itemised "divisions". Only after J. G. Kennedy,

⁷³ *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1920.

⁷⁴ *The Hibernian Journal*, January 1923.

president of the AOH county council, intervened to explain that Hibernians were organised in divisions were the police persuaded to release McCrory.⁷⁵ Kennedy stressed that the Order did not tolerate crime or outrage on the part of its members.

Republicanism was not the only reason why the northern police closely watched Hibernian activities. Reports from infiltrated police officers to the Minister of Home Affairs focused on the debate about recognition of partition, abstention and criticism of the Free State.⁷⁶ The RUC documented the political debate within the Order, although the number of reports halved between 1923 and 1924, and continued to decrease in the following years. In parallel, unionist authorities seemed to gradually adopt a tolerant attitude towards the AOH. In 1923, Portadown Orange Lodge wrote to the Minister for Home Affairs warning that an Hibernian demonstration, scheduled for 12 May, was likely to cause disturbances, especially since the RUC had authorised contingents from the Free State to attend. The Minister replied that they did not expect any trouble from the Hibernians, and that the demonstration was going to take place as agreed.⁷⁷

The Order was always careful to demand permission to hold demonstrations well in advance, particularly when contingents were expected to cross the border, and the RUC customarily escorted divisions on their way to gatherings. Nevertheless, hostility and suspicion towards the Order survived in some quarters. On 9 March 1924, almost 600 members of the AOH and National Foresters left Belfast to attend a demonstration in memory of John Redmond in Waterford.⁷⁸ A few days later, Thompson Donald, Unionist MP for East Belfast, claimed that Hibernians had returned carrying arms with them. Donald did not cite any evidence, but held the District Inspector responsible for the smuggling of arms, since he had not searched the returning excursionists at the train station.⁷⁹ Subsequently, the RUC Inspector General replied that “the excursionists were of a respectable class and of mature years, a number being ladies. They were under the control of a very law abiding

⁷⁵ PRONI, HA/32/1/251 (Searching of premises of AOH).

⁷⁶ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-’27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland).

⁷⁷ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-’27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. Letter from the Orange Hall in Portadown and reply from Minister for Home Affairs).

⁷⁸ The Irish National Foresters were a friendly society that seceded from the AOH in 1877. *The Ulster Herald*, 26 July 2014.

⁷⁹ Stormont papers, Vol. 4, col. 95. 12 March 1924.

committee, who would, it is believed, inform the police had anything occurred such as Mr Donald asserted".⁸⁰

It appears that northern authorities did not consider Hibernianism as a threat. The Protestant community occasionally supported Hibernians' charitable activity. In 1926, Lady Craig subscribed £5.5s for funding an excursion of children of poor parents in West Belfast organised by the Order.⁸¹ The Order slowly regained strength in the second half of the 1920s, but, as described later in the chapter, it was no longer the powerful organisation that Devlin had attached to the IPP in 1905. However, the AOH was still the main traditional opponent of orangeism, being the largest secular Catholic organisation spread over the territory of Northern Ireland. As such, it was often targeted by Orangemen and Specials. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, several halls were burned, blown up and wrecked, such as in Randalstown (Antrim), Ballyliss (Armagh) and Hillhead (Derry).⁸²

One hall in Annahugh, near Loughgall in county Armagh, was the object of repeated attacks between 1929 and 1930. The hall was burned to the ground in January 1929. No arrests were made, but the police organised a night patrol to watch the new hall built on the same site. On the night of 13 October, after the patrol had passed, a party of between 200 and 300 armed men, marching in military formation and carrying rifles, arrived at the hall. They dug holes in the concrete foundation and placed explosives. The hall was totally wrecked.⁸³

As the nationalist press called for a government enquiry, police reports to the Minister for Home Affairs observed that, since the hall was built in a Catholic district surrounded by Protestant parishes, the outrage was due to "religious feeling", and that investigation would lead to no arrests because of the lack of co-operation from the inhabitants.⁸⁴ In January 1930, the Order was awarded £200 in compensation, and Hibernians undertook to rebuild the hall a third time on a different site, in an all-Catholic area.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, this did not help. One year after the second attack, the new hall built in Ballygagen was blown up. One

⁸⁰ PRONI, HA/32/1/419 (Commons question tabled by Mr Donald alleging smuggling of arms by persons on excursion from Belfast to Waterford organised by AOH and Irish National Foresters intended to commemorate John Redmond).

⁸¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, July 1926.

⁸² *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1932.

⁸³ *The Irish News*, 15 October 1929.

⁸⁴ PRONI, HA/32/1/587 (Annahugh AOH Hall. Minute sheet, 15 Oct. 1929).

⁸⁵ PRONI, HA/32/1/587 (Annahugh AOH Hall. Inspector's general office, RUC, to secretary, Ministry Home Affairs. 29 Jan. 1930).

night, around a hundred men in military formation attacked police officers who were on duty at the hall to prevent further attacks, tied them up and held them prisoners until the building was destroyed.⁸⁶ As usual, no arrests were made. In January 1931, the AOH was awarded £86 in compensation by Judge Green, who complained for having the claim put before him for the third time. He condemned the attack as an insolent challenge to the law, an exhibition of intolerance, and regretted that nobody had been prosecuted. Since he believed that not only locals were responsible, the area of charge for the compensation comprised six districts around Annahugh.⁸⁷

The case had great resonance in the press. The *Dundalk Examiner* called for a southern boycott of northern products, arguing that the fate of the Catholic minority was in the hands of the Free State: "We want justice for our brothers in the North. We are hungry for national unity".⁸⁸ However, it seems that there were no repercussions. The *Irish News* conducted an inquiry concluding that B-Specials were responsible for the attack. Evidence was constituted by cartridges found at the hall, which were of the type fitting service-pattern rifles supplied to B-Specials, and the rifles had slings normally fitted to service rifles.⁸⁹

In the northern parliament, nationalist representatives bitterly complained about the inability of the RUC to find those responsible for the attacks, despite citizens paying £885,000 a year for the ordinary constabulary force, plus £ 77,000 for the Specials. Dawson Bates, Minister for Home Affairs, defended the RUC by arguing that, since nobody in the neighbourhood co-operated, they could not bring the attackers to justice. Robert McBride, Unionist MP for Down, suggested that Sinn Féiners and not Orangemen were responsible for the attacks. Nationalists dismissed the claim by pointing to the fact that, during the second assault, armed pickets were placed at the doors of houses occupied by Catholics in the neighbourhood, whereas two Protestants living in a cottage nearby were awakened by the raiding party and removed to a safe place until the explosion.⁹⁰ Devlin stressed that

⁸⁶ *The Irish News*, 20 October 1930.

⁸⁷ *The Belfast Newsletter*, 22 January 1931.

⁸⁸ *The Dundalk Examiner*, 25 October 1930.

⁸⁹ *The Irish News*, 28 October 1930.

⁹⁰ *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1929.

Hibernians were “inoffensive citizens discharging duties to the state, offending nobody”, and that the area where the hall was built was not hostile to the Order.⁹¹

Northern authorities did not interfere with Hibernian activities, and occasionally had a “benevolent” attitude towards them, recognising that they were not causing trouble and abided by the law. It is possible that, as the *Irish News* claimed for Annahugh, attacks on halls were not supported by all unionists because malicious injury claims affected more severely the large ratepayers, predominantly Protestants.⁹² This seems to be confirmed by Judge Green’s remarks. Nevertheless, Hibernians remained a traditional target for Orangemen and Specials, who enjoyed undisputed protection from the authorities. Those responsible for the attacks were never prosecuted, although in one case it seemed that the RUC was not ready to tolerate loyalist violence.

On the morning of 15 August 1927, a group of 120 Hibernians was on their way to Moy (Tyrone) railway station to attend a demonstration in Lurgan. Despite being escorted by the police, they were fired at by a party of ten men: nobody was injured, but the bullets cut off branches of trees and grazed a policeman’s cap.⁹³ Hibernians had previously visited the RUC district inspector to ask if there were objections to them taking the road to Moy station, and were told there were none.⁹⁴ Reports to the Ministry for Home Affairs suggest that the police underestimated indications of hostility towards the Order displayed by Orangemen shortly before the attack. However, police officers identified four men among the attackers, three of whom were Specials, and arrested them. The RUC Inspector General wrote to the Ministry for Home Affairs suggesting that those arrested be charged with riot and violation of the Firearms act, stressing that the shooting could have had serious consequences.⁹⁵

The fact that the Inspector had to write recommending that proceedings be instituted against the offenders suggests that he was not confident that justice would be swift and sure. He was proved right. The Law department stated that the assailants did not mean to kill, as they did not fire into the crowd, and, without intent, only unlawful assembly was a

⁹¹ Stormont papers, Vol. 11, col. 1111 – 1112. 7 Nov. 1929.

⁹² *The Irish News*, 15 November 1930.

⁹³ *The Belfast Newsletter*, 16 August 1927.

⁹⁴ PRONI, HA/32/1/522 (AOH procession fired on at Trew and Moy. Inspector General Office, RUC, Belfast. 18 Aug. 1927. To the secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs).

⁹⁵ PRONI, HA/32/1/522 (AOH procession fired on at Trew and Moy. Inspector General Office, RUC, Belfast. 29 Aug. 1927. To the Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs).

suitable charge.⁹⁶ In October, the crimes court held at Moy found the four men guilty and sentenced them to one month imprisonment, but at Dungannon quarter sessions the verdict was reversed. Judge Linehan, the same who attributed ownership of Fallagh hall to the AOH in 1921, believed that police officers had mistakenly identified the witnesses, and gave prisoners the benefit of doubt, though he admitted that the accused were hostile to the procession and their alibis were not convincing.⁹⁷

Not only was nobody convicted for the shooting, but the authorities decided to avoid future trouble by preventing Hibernians from using the road to Moy station again. In January 1930, George Harris, on behalf of Dawson Bates, wrote to the Tyrone county inspector, inviting him to deny authorisation and police escort in case the Order demanded use of the road. Harris realised that the instruction could not be official as it was “contrary to the first principle of the King’s highway being free to the King’s subjects, but (...) there is an unwritten law in certain parts of Northern Ireland regarding such matters. (...) If the Hibernians had not seen fit to break their unwritten agreement with the other side on that particular occasion there would have been no trouble”.⁹⁸ Shortly afterwards, when Hibernians demanded permission to use the road again on St Patrick’s day, the local district inspector rejected their request. Moreover, northern authorities contacted the Great Northern Railway who agreed not to organise excursion trains and to interrupt the service at Moy station on St Patrick’s day.⁹⁹ All that Hibernians could do was to approve a motion protesting against the authorities not letting them use Moy station.¹⁰⁰

Episodes like Annahugh and Moy served to alienate Hibernians and Catholics in general from the unionist government. The *Hibernian Journal* seemed to take comfort from the fact that Catholics had “a party in the Northern Parliament, which, if it cannot secure redress, can expose the infamy”.¹⁰¹ However, nationalists’ continuous denunciation of the sectarian

⁹⁶ PRONI, HA/32/1/522 (AOH procession fired on at Trew and Moy. Law department, chief crown solicitor, minute sheet, 31 Aug. 1927).

⁹⁷ PRONI, HA/32/1/522 (AOH procession fired on at Trew and Moy. Inspector General’s Office, RUC, Belfast. 25 Jan. 1928. To the Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs).

⁹⁸ PRONI, HA/32/1/522 (AOH procession fired on at Trew and Moy. Letter from George Harris, Ocean Buildings, Belfast, to County Inspector. 30 Jan. 1928).

⁹⁹ PRONI, HA/32/1/522 (AOH procession fired on at Trew and Moy. Correspondence between the Inspector General RUC and the Great Northern Railway Traffic Manager’s Office).

¹⁰⁰ *The Irish Independent*, 19 March 1928.

¹⁰¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1930.

attitude of the authorities in parliament was ineffective. Violence against Hibernians not only continued but seemed to increase in the early 1930s. In March 1932, Hibernians travelling to a St Patrick's day demonstration in Magherafelt (Londonderry) were fired at near Ballinderry bridge. Whereas previous attacks inflicted no casualties, here two young men were wounded, one of them seriously.¹⁰²

The RUC announced that a £500 reward would be paid to any person who would give information leading to the conviction of the attackers. The Prime Minister visited the injured men at the Mater Hospital, expressing his sincere sympathy and wishing them a speedy recovery.¹⁰³ Sir Dawson Bates and the RUC Inspector General visited the scene of the shooting.¹⁰⁴ The *Journal* reported that Hibernian offices in Belfast had received information about ex B-Specials re-organising to create trouble in the hope that they would be employed again.¹⁰⁵ It is possible, as mentioned in chapter one, that after the reorganisation of the RUC and the reduction of their number, some ex-Specials tried to increase sectarian tension and take advantage of the situation. In any case, as usual, those responsible for the attack were never brought to justice.

- **The reorganisation of the Order after partition**

As already mentioned, the AOH started experiencing a decline in popularity after 1916. Since no official records of the Voluntary section exist today, the only source for the study of Hibernian membership is the *Journal*, which occasionally published figures regarding the number of divisions, more rarely the number of members. Unfortunately, copies of the *Journal* from February 1921 to December 1922 are missing from the collections of the National Library and National Archives of Ireland, and Trinity College Dublin. Since there is no evidence indicating that the headquarters of the AOH in Mountjoy square, Dublin, were destroyed during the War of Independence, leading to the loss of *Journal* copies, it is likely that publication ceased in early 1921, and restarted at the end of 1922. Issues from January 1923 never mention any interruption, but the *Journal's* front-page mast-head had changed

¹⁰² *The Belfast Newsletter*, 18 March 1932.

¹⁰³ *The Northern Whig*, 19 March 1932.

¹⁰⁴ *The Belfast Newsletter*, 19 March 1932.

¹⁰⁵ *The Hibernian Journal*, April 1932.

from 1921. This may confirm that publication resumed in 1923 after almost two years during which the Board of Erin was overall inactive and did not retain control of the few surviving local divisions, which kept a low profile and carried on a few activities autonomously.

It is hard to estimate the decline in membership between 1921 and 1923. In 1920, the *Journal* reported that 952 divisions were active in Ireland, their number having halved in the last five years.¹⁰⁶ However, the state of the country and the decline of the IPP alienated most Hibernians from the organisation. A general convention scheduled for 1921 was postponed.¹⁰⁷ According to the Board of Erin minutes, the number of divisions dropped to 515 between 1921 and 1922.¹⁰⁸ In an attempt to counteract intimidation by republicans, a central division was created in Dublin, where members who were afraid of attending meetings in their localities might register, enabling them to continue their membership of the Order.¹⁰⁹ However, no records of this division survive today, and it is not possible to determine if the initiative was successful.

The crisis of the organisation is confirmed by private correspondence and local press reports. In April 1921, Devlin wrote to John Dillon, Vice-President of the AOH, lamenting the situation of the Order: "The want of machinery, the lack of funds, and the difficulty of raising enthusiasm make our job an extremely difficult one".¹¹⁰ In a letter of December 1921, Andrew Campbell, a member of Bleary (Down) division, informed Nugent that only seven of the 28 local Hibernians were still loyal to the IPP, the rest having turned to Sinn Féin. As many others, Bleary division was eventually dissolved.¹¹¹

Analysis of the local press shows that the period between 1921 and 1923 was particularly critical, but that the AOH did not disappear despite a sharp decline in membership. The *Anglo-Celt*, a weekly paper based in Cavan but reporting from Fermanagh, Longford, Louth, Monaghan, Meath, Westmeath and Leitrim, used to devote much attention to Hibernian

¹⁰⁶ *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1920.

¹⁰⁷ *The Hibernian Journal*, January 1923.

¹⁰⁸ S. McPhillips, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians in county Monaghan with particular reference to the Parish of Aghabog from 1900 to 1933* (National University of Ireland Maynooth, Master thesis, 1999) p. 122.

¹⁰⁹ *The Hibernian Journal*, September 1920.

¹¹⁰ M. T. Foy, *The Ancient Order of Hibernians: an Irish political-religious pressure group, 1884-1975* (Queen's University Belfast, Master thesis, 1976), p. 151.

¹¹¹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 143.

activities until 1921. This was likely due to the fact that the paper was owned by the O'Hanlon family, and John O'Hanlon, the company manager, was Deputy President of the AOH county committee.¹¹² Reports show that between 1922 and 1923, dances and events held in Hibernian halls were organised by sport and parochial organisations, instead of the AOH. Only one new member was initiated in 1922, and none in 1923, whereas in 1920 the number of men joining the Order was 30.¹¹³

The Order started its slow recovery towards the end of 1922. In December, a national convention was held in Dublin to discuss the state of the association and its reorganisation. Devlin reported that 615 divisions were in good standing and with their levies paid, 77 were 2/4 in arrears and others 3/4. Several divisions whose halls were destroyed or confiscated by republicans were obliged to dissolve, but divisions providing benefits for their members generally survived. The total membership was over 242,000 people, including insurance members.¹¹⁴ This number may suggest that the Order was not in a bad condition. However, insurance members, a passive category, were always more numerous than ordinary ones: for example, in 1915 the former numbered twice the latter. It is likely that the Voluntary section of the AOH was far smaller than the Insurance Branch.

At the convention, the National President announced the creation of two Provincial Councils (one for the Free State and one for Northern Ireland). Local government was to be transferred to the Councils to relieve the Board of Erin of most of the minute, detail work discharged in the past. Hibernian leaders asserted their commitment to Irish unity by rejecting proposal to transfer the Order's headquarters from Dublin to Belfast because the number of members in the Free State was far lower than in Northern Ireland.¹¹⁵ In fact, in Ulster the AOH regained strength more rapidly than in the rest of Ireland. In autumn 1923, J. P. Gaynor, Dublin County President, asserted that southern Hibernians "carried on because of the inspiration they received from their brethren in the North (...). The loyalty, fidelity and

¹¹² *The Anglo-Celt*, 31 January 1920.

¹¹³ *The Anglo-Celt*, 1920, 1922, 1923.

¹¹⁴ *The Hibernian Journal*, January 1923.

¹¹⁵ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-'27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. From District Inspector's Office R.U.C., Armagh City, 23 Jan. 1923).

enthusiasm of the North of Ireland Hibernians had been to those in Dublin and in the rest of Ireland a grand inspiration".¹¹⁶

A campaign to revive inactive divisions was particularly successful in north-east Ulster. In July 1923, Armagh was the only county in Ireland where every division had all returns up to date and levies paid.¹¹⁷ By August 1924, Armagh city division had 750 members.¹¹⁸ However, most Tyrone divisions were still inactive, and Devlin openly discussed the opportunity of attaching the few ones resuming activity to neighbouring counties.¹¹⁹

The situation in the Free State resembled the North since there were areas where the Order was successfully reorganising and others where it languished. "All the way from Louth to Dublin splendid work is being done", the *Journal* reported in December 1924. Dundalk division was numerically the largest in Ireland.¹²⁰ Limerick, Cork and Waterford also gave a positive response to the call for reorganisation. There were, however, significant exceptions. In November 1924, a case about the illegal use and occupation of a property was heard at Boyle Circuit Court (Leitrim).¹²¹ The defendant and his family took occupation in one of the plaintiff's properties after the Free State army had occupied their house in February 1923. According to the plaintiff, the defendant damaged the property, where he spent nine months, by keeping goats there. The defendant denied the accusation and asserted that he used to keep his goats in the Hibernian hall, a statement that caused great laughter. It appears that the Hibernian hall in Arigna was not in use, nor there were efforts to resume Hibernian activity in the area.

The decline in membership and the difficulty in reviving old divisions, along with the crisis of constitutional politics, were presented as symptoms of a moral decline affecting all Catholic Ireland. The *Journal* blamed "attractions and distractions" tearing people away from "even a simple acknowledgement of sound, sane ideals", and repeatedly invited divisions to organise activities and provide entertainment in order to attract new members.¹²² The Order shared with the Catholic Church a deep concern for the declining morality in Ireland.

¹¹⁶ *The Hibernian Journal*, October 1923.

¹¹⁷ *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1923.

¹¹⁸ *The Anglo-Celt*, 23 August 1924.

¹¹⁹ *The Hibernian Journal*, July 1923.

¹²⁰ *The Hibernian Journal*, December 1923.

¹²¹ *The Leitrim Observer*, 1 November 1924.

¹²² *The Hibernian Journal*, February 1920.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Catholic bishops from both sides of the border repeatedly condemned the corruption of virtuous Irish customs by alien films, dances and books. Dancing halls were particularly resented by the Church that considered them a serious threat to sexual morality since they were attended by men and women who danced all night and then walked home together across the countryside.¹²³ However, dance halls and cinemas remained very popular in the 1920s and 1930s.¹²⁴ In 1922, there were thirty-seven picture houses in Dublin and, despite criticism from the Church, cinema became one of the favourite forms of entertainment in Ireland.¹²⁵

The Order presented itself as a non-political, faith-based organisation whose aim was to defend Catholics' position within the community. In 1924, a booklet was issued containing the general rules of the AOH, which were applicable to Northern Ireland as well as the Free State. The Order was divided into a Voluntary Section, a National Health Insurance Section, a Co-operative banking section, and a Building Fund section. Objects of the AOH were: the cultivation of closer union between Catholics in the professions, in commerce, and in the public service; the promotion of the best interests of the members by individual and collective action; the furtherance of the interests of Catholic youths entering professional or commercial life or the public service.¹²⁶

At a time when the AOH had almost completely lost its political importance, Hibernians began to look back at their history in order to assert their social and cultural role in Ireland. The *Journal* published lectures, such as "Church and Socialism" and "Irish Land Reform: the Irish Party's share in it", claiming the past and present role of the association in advocating Catholics' rights and defending the faith. Recent events, such as the murder of members during the war, were commemorated through the unveiling of monuments and demonstrations. The first was for Arthur Treanor in 1925, and O'Brien and McPhillips in the early 1930s. However, during the pogroms of summer 1920 in Belfast a significant number of Catholics involved were likely Hibernians, since the IPP still enjoyed higher support than

¹²³ J. H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1970* (Dublin, 1971), pp. 24-9.

¹²⁴ D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004), pp. 336-7.

¹²⁵ R. J. Savage, 'Film and Broadcast Media', in A. Jackson, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 268-9.

¹²⁶ PRONI, COM/41/1/2/6 (The Ancient Order of Hibernians (Board of Erin). Friendly Society of Northern Ireland and Great Britain. General Rules. 1924).

Sinn Féin in the town.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, unlike Treanor, McPhillips and O'Brien, victims of sectarian violence were not commemorated.

The *Journal* published articles describing Hibernians as defenders of the faith since the sixteenth century, while the Dublin County Board issued a booklet arguing that the AOH was still very much needed in Ireland, where the Catholic faith was under threat from masonic institutions and unionist rule. Recalling the Defenders, the *Journal* wrote, "Ascendancy dies hard (...). Though the arms with which we are called upon to win back the unity of our partitioned fatherland (...) are neither the pike nor the blunderbuss, the need for organisation, for cohesion, for disciplined unity and concerted action is as urgent and exigent and vital as in the days when the Mass was banned (...)"¹²⁸ Such rhetoric was not reserved to the North alone. In the Free State, the Order was necessary because morality was lax, authority flouted, age was contemned, and honesty no longer esteemed: "such is the moral and social aftermath of all revolutionary movements".¹²⁹ Hibernians considered themselves as moral guardians of the Irish society, north and south of the border. In this capacity, their tasks ranged from dealing with the evil of foreign literature and cinema destroying Ireland's youth, to providing healthy entertainment, to promoting the selection of honest men for the Belfast and Dublin parliaments.

Little information is available about the Ladies' Auxiliaries. There were 42 Ladies' Auxiliaries divisions in Northern Ireland in early 1923, ten of which in Belfast.¹³⁰ The number dropped to 22 in late 1924, suggesting a significant loss of members.¹³¹ However, the Ladies' Auxiliaries survived at least until 1931, when the *Journal* reported their annual reunion in St Mary's hall, Belfast, attended by 350 people.¹³²

At the end of 1923, during a conference in Donegal, Michael Dunnion, county President, declared himself in favour of mixed divisions, stating that, since women in Ireland were taking part in the country's affairs, they had a right to meet with the men if they so desired.¹³³ It appears that Dunnion's suggestion was not received, and Ladies' Auxiliaries

¹²⁷ T. K. Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence* (Oxford, 2010), p. 128.

¹²⁸ *The Hibernian Journal*, February 1925.

¹²⁹ *The Hibernian Journal*, March 1928.

¹³⁰ *The Hibernian Journal*, March 1923.

¹³¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, January 1925.

¹³² *The Hibernian Journal*, April 1931.

¹³³ *The Hibernian Journal*, January 1924.

continued to carry on their tradition of philanthropy, with the exception of Dublin, where the Hibernian Literary and Debating society saw the attendance of several women. Women's role within the organisation was reasserted in the booklet containing the general rules of the AOH, where only one page dealt with the Ladies' Auxiliaries, saying that they had to follow the same rules of male sections. Unlike for the juvenile section, the objects of Ladies' divisions were not specified.¹³⁴

In parallel with the decline of the Ladies' Auxiliaries, the years 1924 and 1925 registered an increase in the number of male divisions, and new halls were opened throughout the island. At the end of 1924, there were 134 divisions in the Free State, 49 of which were Benefit divisions, and 199 in Northern Ireland.¹³⁵ Many old members re-joined the Order, and Hibernian gatherings on St Patrick's and Assumption's days were very successful. In 1924, three demonstrations were held on 15 August. The one in Dundalk saw the highest attendance with 10,000 participants and divisions from Northern Ireland, border counties in the Free State and Dublin. Eight thousand people gathered in Omagh, and Toomebridge (Antrim) demonstration was equally successful.¹³⁶ The leaders of the AOH openly encouraged mass meetings that, as Nugent wrote, were necessary to assert the Order's strength, particularly "when the Boundary question is agitating the minds of at least three distinct governments".¹³⁷

Mass demonstrations, however, continued even after the failure of the Boundary Commission, replacing church parades attended by parish members that had characterised the Order before partition. Now that the organisation was slowly recovering from near extinction, Hibernians tried to claim space and importance within the two Irish states. Mass demonstrations proved effective in assuring them visibility within the community, and press coverage, although it is likely that they were attended by several people who were not officially members of the Order. In Northern Ireland in particular, the AOH was the only major Catholic organisation providing entertainment and celebrating religious feast days.

¹³⁴ PRONI, COM/41/1/2/6 (The Ancient Order of Hibernians (Board of Erin). Friendly Society of Northern Ireland and Great Britain. General Rules. 1924).

¹³⁵ *The Hibernian Journal*, January 1925.

¹³⁶ *The Anglo-Celt*, 16 and 23 August 1924; *The Irish Examiner*, 16 August 1924.

¹³⁷ *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1924.

The increase in membership celebrated by the *Journal* was likely due to old members re-joining the Order, as it was hard to recruit new ones, especially in the Free State. Dublin county board suggested modifying the Initiation ceremony because, they claimed, the main difficulty in recruiting new members was that parents did not allow their children to join any organisation savouring of secrecy. Thus, they designed a Proposal Form containing the essential substance of the Initiation ritual, to be publicly signed by the applicant and duly witnessed.¹³⁸ However, it seems that this did not improve the situation and by 1926, two thirds of the members were middle-aged or of advanced age.¹³⁹ In order to attract new members and fight emigration, which, according to Hibernians, often resulted from the dullness of rural life, Nugent encouraged divisions to provide more entertainment. He lamented that halls were used only three or four times a month on the average for dances and concerts, and repeatedly suggested different activities, such as Literary and Debating classes and badminton. One of the most prominent Hibernian clubs in the Falls road, Belfast, whose hall was capable of seating almost 500 people, offered dance classes, billiard competitions, and announced the creation of a library in October 1925.¹⁴⁰

Despite increased visibility, the Order was cautious from a political point of view, and carefully avoided attaching itself to any party in the Free State. “My own personal view is that the time has not yet arrived for us to make any big advance”, asserted Devlin at a meeting of the Board of Erin in January 1926.¹⁴¹ The political weakness of the Order in the Free State became evident when, at the Seanad elections of September 1925, Hibernians promoted five candidates, and every division was told what candidate they were expected to give first preferential vote. In the end, the five candidates were not elected.¹⁴²

According to the National Board, numerical strength was not as important as the existence of the organisation and its discipline, and a low membership could be an advantage, since many in the past joined the AOH for selfish and personal considerations. For example,

¹³⁸ *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1924.

¹³⁹ NAI, LOU 13/1/3 (a) (Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, Friendly Society. Meeting of the National Board, 5 Aug. 1926, Dublin).

¹⁴⁰ *The Hibernian Journal*, May 1920, October 1925.

¹⁴¹ NAI, LOU 13/1/3 (a) (Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, Friendly Society. Meeting of the National Board, 21 Jan. 1926, Dublin).

¹⁴² NAI, LOU 13/1/3 (a) (Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, Friendly Society. Meeting of the National Board, 5 Aug. 1926, Dublin).

between 1912 and 1913, many believed it necessary to be an Hibernian to participate in the advantages of the Insurance Act. In 1914, civil servants in Dublin joined because, anticipating the passing of Home Rule, they hoped to secure promotion in their departments. However, the Board admitted that rural members were little concerned with the general administration of the Order, whose main function was to provide them with opportunities to organise big gatherings.¹⁴³ The Board of Erin recognised that “demonstrations, especially in Ulster, are as necessary for the organisation as advertising is for the development of a business”, although they should not be the aim but a means to further the interests of the Order.¹⁴⁴ There were cases of divisions created just before a demonstration and disappeared immediately after it, while members who seldom attended meetings appeared before gatherings as leaders. The weakness of Provincial Boards allowed these abuses to happen, according to the Board of Erin.

After having regained many old members, the Order struggled to expand. 1927 registered a slight increase in membership and number of divisions, as there were 217 in Northern Ireland and 146 in the Free State.¹⁴⁵ In 1929, the number of divisions in the Free State had not changed, whereas in the North there were two divisions less. The following year, the Free State lost one division and reached 145, whereas Northern Ireland saw an increase to 223 (eight more than in 1929). In 1930, most of the Free State divisions were concentrated in border counties and Dublin, while Donegal hosted 38 divisions, Cavan 23, Monaghan and Dublin 20 each, and Louth 9. In Northern Ireland, Londonderry County had 45 divisions, Belfast 18, and the other counties between 20 and 40.¹⁴⁶

There was no Provincial Board in the Free State, “owing to its scattered membership”, and thus they organised conferences to bring divisions closer to the Central Office. Once again, Nugent and Devlin opposed proposals to transfer the Central Office to Belfast, arguing that Dublin was the capital of the Irish Nation. Towards the end of the 1920s, there were still areas where the Order did not seem capable of recovery, such as Enniskillen and south Armagh, whereas the situation in Belfast was satisfactory.¹⁴⁷ Here and in Dublin, Hibernian

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ NAI, LOU 13/1/3 (a) (Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, Friendly Society. Meeting of the National Board, 3 Mar. 1927, Dublin).

¹⁴⁵ *The Hibernian Journal*, July 1927.

¹⁴⁶ *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1930.

¹⁴⁷ *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1929.

Debating Societies were very active. In the North, the subject of discussion was often the condition of the minority, whereas in the South topics ranged from compulsory Irish, to cinema as a popular menace, to women emancipation.¹⁴⁸

Difficulties in recruiting new members did not impact on gatherings and excursions organised by the AOH. In June 1924, Coalisland (Tyrone) division organised a trip to Dublin attended by 800 people, and the year after 200 Hibernians participated to an excursion from Burtonport to Letterkenny (Donegal).¹⁴⁹ On this occasion, the train carrying the Hibernians narrowly escaped an attack that could have cost lives. One side of the railway line was interfered with so as to divert trains into a siding connecting with a ballast pit, and two miles further a large quantity of stones were piled on the line. The stones were discovered by a linesman who gave warning, thus saving the train.¹⁵⁰ Hibernian leaders sharply criticised the Free State authorities and accused them of protecting sectional instead of national interests, as nobody was charged for the crime.¹⁵¹ This episode was likely the result of antagonism between Hibernians and Sinn Féiners in Donegal, revived by an effective reorganisation campaign launched by the Order in early 1924. As divisions re-opened and their membership steadily increased, it seems that a few die-hard republicans in the county reacted violently.

In June 1924, Ardara Hibernian hall, whose possession the AOH had just recovered from the county Sheriff, was burned.¹⁵² In early 1926, posters displayed in Inver, Dunkeneely and Mountacharles declared a boycott by Sinn Féin of the new AOH hall opened at Ardagh. A similar boycott was declared against the hall in Ballybofey, but it did not seem to have been effective.¹⁵³ The most serious episode resulting from hostility between republicans and Hibernians in the late 1920s took place in March 1927. Bunbeg Hibernian hall, one of the finest in the country, was burned to the ground.¹⁵⁴ The hall had been erected two years before, after the previous building had been destroyed in similar circumstances. In March 1927, two among the arsonists died from burns on the day after the attack. Locals who tried

¹⁴⁸ *The Hibernian Journal*, April 1929, January 1930

¹⁴⁹ *The Hibernian Journal*, July 1924 and June 1925.

¹⁵⁰ *The Irish Independent*, 22 May 1925.

¹⁵¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, June 1925.

¹⁵² *The Fermanagh Herald*, 21 June 1924.

¹⁵³ *The Hibernian Journal*, March 1926.

¹⁵⁴ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 12 March 1927.

to help them, knowing that the two were involved in fire-starting, initially concealed their identities from the Civic Guards so that they would not be arrested.¹⁵⁵

Gardaí were later informed that a third man was injured and brought by boat to an island a couple of miles away from the shore. The officers failed to persuade any of the local boatmen to take them to the island, as the latter argued that it was too dangerous. During the inquest held the following month in Letterkenny, it was regretted that the burning of halls was still happening at a time when people could debate different views without resorting to violence. Finally, nobody was arrested in connection with the fire, and the third man was never identified. The *Journal* expressed sympathy for the two “poor misguided men”, but condemned those who did not allow their fellow religionists to have different opinions, and complained about the lack of arrests.¹⁵⁶

Donegal was not the only county of the Free State where the reorganisation of the Order caused resentment. In a new Hibernian hall erected in Ture (Monaghan), a bomb was found and removed, but only two weeks later, the corrugated iron roof was carried almost half a mile away. A warning notice was affixed, saying that if attempts to restore the roof were made, more serious damage would follow.¹⁵⁷ Hostility between Hibernians and republicans seems to be limited to Donegal and Monaghan, and it gradually faded towards the end of the 1920s.

The situation of the Order north and south of the border was increasingly divergent. In Northern Ireland, the Order was attached to the Nationalist Party and faced attacks by Specials and Orangemen, whereas in the Free State it was politically isolated, as republicans were hostile and Cumann na nGaedheal did not want to associate itself with the AOH.¹⁵⁸ Hibernian leaders recognised that there could be no uniformity of policy. In the Free State, county boards were free to decide their own policy on every occasion, as long as they

¹⁵⁵ *The Derry People and Donegal News*, 2 April 1927.

¹⁵⁶ *The Hibernian Journal*, April 1927.

¹⁵⁷ *The Hibernian Journal*, May 1924.

¹⁵⁸ NAI, LOU 13/1/3 (a) (Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, Friendly Society. Meeting of the National Board, 3 Mar. 1927, Dublin).

supported Catholic measures, whereas in the North the Order was uniformly against abstention.¹⁵⁹

However, the Board of Erin maintained the organisation as a unified body, subject to the same rules with one central authority, and strove to maintain contact between North and South divisions. In order to preserve the unity of the organisation, they registered the same General Rules in both areas with a central office in Belfast for Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and a Head Office in Dublin for the Free State.¹⁶⁰ Nugent and Devlin also encouraged divisions to cross the border to attend events, and Hibernian gatherings came to represent some of the most significant opportunities for meeting people living in the neighbour state. As T. P. O'Brien, representing the National Board, said at a gathering in Castleblayney (Monaghan), which was attended by contingents from Armagh, Cavan, Fermanagh, Louth and Tyrone, Hibernians did not recognise any boundary, and worked for the day when Ireland would be one again.¹⁶¹

Unionist authorities grew increasingly tolerant towards Hibernians and generally allowed them to cross the border to attend meetings. Gatherings in Donegal often registered the attendance of contingents from Derry and Tyrone, whereas events in Armagh and Fermanagh attracted divisions from Louth, Cavan, and Monaghan. In general, divisions from border counties were more likely to travel across the boundary. However, whereas in Northern Ireland Antrim Hibernians occasionally attended events south of the border, Dublin, Cork, Waterford, as well as Meath and Westmeath divisions, rarely travelled far. It seems that southern divisions were more isolated than northern ones, and less keen to maintain cross border relations. In fact, excursions and commemorations generally involved divisions moving from North to South. For example, Coalisland (Tyrone) division organised an excursion to Dublin in June 1924, Annaghmore (Antrim) division travelled to Bundoran (Donegal) in June 1926, Belfast divisions visited Blackrock (Louth) in summer 1930, and northern Hibernians attended every year a ceremony in memory of John Redmond in Wexford.

¹⁵⁹ NAI, LOU 13/1/3 (a) (Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, Friendly Society. Meeting of the National Board, 16 Nov. 1927, Dublin).

¹⁶⁰ *The Hibernian Journal*, January 1925.

¹⁶¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1926.

Occasionally, the *Journal* exaggerated the courage required to cross the border, as in spring 1923 when a contingent of fifty men travelled from Monaghan to Armagh. “How the division succeeded in travelling with a band across the border and eluding the vigilance of the Specials is a mystery to all except those who carried it out”, commented the *Journal*.¹⁶²

However, the RUC had granted permission for crossing the border, and had the Monaghan Hibernians broken the law, it is unlikely that the *Journal* would have publicised it.

As members of the main Catholic organisation in the North, northern Hibernians occasionally paid the price for incidents taking place in the Free State. In July 1931, during an Orange demonstration in Bailieborough (Cavan), a Protestant clergyman just arrived from Scotland, Rev Bennie, delivered a speech particularly offensive to Catholics. He claimed that “the Catholic Church was par excellence in money making preaching”, and that it had various toll-gates along the path that led to heaven, such as confession and Purgatory.¹⁶³ One night shortly after the demonstration, Rev Bennie was kidnapped from his home by unknown young men. He was taken ten miles away, forced to sign an apology, and finally left barefoot in his night attire to find his way home. He subsequently moved back to Scotland.¹⁶⁴

Another Orange demonstration was scheduled to take place in Cootehill (Cavan) on 12 August. The night before, young men from Leitrim and Cavan descended on the town and posted placards in the name of the IRA against the Imperialist Orange demonstration. They tore up public roads, cut railway lines, and severed telephone and telegraph communications. They took possession of the town until the evening, and no demonstration could be held.¹⁶⁵

These events persuaded Orangemen in Northern Ireland to retaliate during the Assumption holy-day celebration in Armagh city. The night before the scheduled procession, groups of men removed a rail on the line between Portadown and Rich Hill (Armagh), and blocked roads towards Keady.¹⁶⁶ The day after, the procession in Armagh city took place as planned, and initially there was no trouble. One of the speakers, J. Coburn, TD for Dundalk, “dwelt on

¹⁶² *The Hibernian Journal*, June 1923.

¹⁶³ *The Hibernian Journal*, September 1931.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Minute sheet, Ministry Home Affairs, 15.8.31. PRONI, HA/5/1476: Lady Day demonstration, Armagh, 15/8/31.

the spirit of the younger men in the Free State who were causing trouble, and traced its origin to the Communist movement, against which he warned the Hibernians".¹⁶⁷

Despite a firm repudiation of the attacks against Orangemen in the South, incidents started in the afternoon when opposing parties singing *A soldier's song* and *Derry's walls* threw stones at each other. A local clergyman and the Hibernian county president, Patrick McKenna, intervened and asked crowds to disperse, but they were ignored. McKenna was insulted by men "inspired by republican sentiment, and not only anti-British but also anti-Hibernian threats were made. It was noticed that some of ringleaders were to be seen first in one party and then in another. They were men who had come in from a distance and were working solely to create trouble".¹⁶⁸ During the night, windows of nationalist houses were broken, and the police removed some Catholic families in Protestant areas. In the meantime, riots spread to other areas. In Portadown, a bus of Hibernians returning from Armagh was attacked. A number of licensed premises in the main streets were damaged, as well as some Protestant houses, while young men from country districts attacked St Patrick's hall, belonging to Catholic Young Men's Association. Since the RUC was unable to withstand the rushes of the mob, B-Specials were mobilised. The following day, fifty policemen arrived from Belfast, and peace was finally restored. In Lisburn, crowds gathered in front of the Hibernian hall to sing party songs, then attacked a parochial house and the convent of the Sacred Heart. Incidents caused £300 damage.

The *Irish News* tried to pour oil on the waters by praising the RUC for the tactful manner in which they managed the business, and stressed that "we are as deeply concerned as are our political opponents in promoting the commercial welfare of this area".¹⁶⁹

RUC reports generally acknowledged the moderate tone of public speeches by Hibernians, who, however critical of the unionist authorities, were careful to condemn violence from both sides. Nevertheless, Hibernian events in Northern Ireland were sometimes infiltrated by non-members who looked for opportunities for violent confrontation with Orangemen.

¹⁶⁷ Inspector General's Office, RUC, to Secretary, Ministry for Home Affairs. 18 August 1931. PRONI, HA/5/1476: Lady Day demonstration, Armagh, 15/8/31.

¹⁶⁸ *The Belfast Newsletter*, 17 August 1931.

¹⁶⁹ *The Irish News*, 18 August 1931.

The AOH was no longer the powerful organisation of the early 1900s, and it was not able to reject infiltrates.

- **Political debates within the Order**

As Hibernian reorganisation progressed, the political debate on the situation of Catholics in Northern Ireland within the AOH gained momentum. According to the RUC, as early as January 1923 there were rumours that the nationalist candidates would take their seats in the Belfast parliament if elected.¹⁷⁰ Devlin and a significant section of Catholic businessmen and members of the professions were increasingly sceptical about abstention. Hibernian meetings granted them opportunities and venues for discussion. At a gathering in Enniskillen in early 1923, a hundred county delegates lamented that hostility between republicans and nationalists at the recent elections had resulted in the unionists taking control of the urban council, and complained about the lack of clear instructions since the end of the Parliamentary Party. Around the same time, a conference in Ballymena discussed whether Catholics should join the RUC in order not to have an exclusively Protestant police force.¹⁷¹ Several meetings in April 1923 centred on the recognition of unionist authorities.¹⁷² Whereas recognition was often debated by Hibernian divisions, the leaders of the organisation rarely mentioned it during public demonstrations.

The issue was controversial: not only that recognising the state of Northern Ireland meant abandoning any hope to quickly end partition, but also swearing allegiance to its institutions might not anyway be enough to gain unionists' trust. At a gathering in Magherafelt, attended by 3,000 people, Thomas Larkin, chairman of the dissolved Magherafelt Rural Council, reported that his colleagues initially refused to recognise the Belfast parliament. When he finally persuaded them to change their minds, they signed a declaration of allegiance that Larkin submitted to Sir Dawson Bates, Minister of Home Affairs. However, the Minister refused to reinstate the council, and kept sending ex-Army Majors from Belfast,

¹⁷⁰ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-'27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. From District Inspector's Office R.U.C., Armagh City, 23 Jan. 1923).

¹⁷¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, February 1923.

¹⁷² PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-'27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland).

who were highly paid, to discharge the duties the council had previously carried out for free.¹⁷³ Such an account was more likely to strengthen abstentionism than the pro-recognition side.

The problem of recognition was closely linked to the Boundary Commission. Republicans claimed that if Catholic representatives took their seats in local councils this would benefit the unionist case and undermine the possibility of border readjustment. Although Devlin was not optimistic about the Commission, he could not afford to dismiss it and alienate nationalists in border areas. Therefore, he publicly stated that until the Commission was established nationalists would not take their seats.¹⁷⁴ In the meantime, he tried to put pressure on Cosgrave and his government, and the AOH served his purpose.

Hibernians started organising meetings to appoint businessmen's deputations to interview Cosgrave on the boundary question. One of these meetings held in Enniskillen was organised by the Order's county president James Gilgunn.¹⁷⁵ In 1916, Gilgunn was county councillor for the Parliamentary Party, but he voted against the Lloyd George proposal for temporary exclusion of the Six Counties from Home Rule at the Nationalist Conference in Belfast.¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, in 1923, he seemed sceptical about the Free State's commitment to the Commission. His experience is similar to that of many IPP supporters who turned to republicanism when their party endorsed the Lloyd George proposal. After the events of the last years, they believed that the southern interest in the minority was decreasing, and returned to constitutional nationalism and Hibernianism.

By this time, as the leaders of the organisation noted in a circular issued to Hibernian officials, northern Catholics' confidence in those who advised them on the policy of non-recognition was very much shaken.¹⁷⁷ The document envisaged a conference of all the representatives elected to the Belfast parliament by the Catholic population in order to lay the foundation for a constitutional organisation for Ulster. However, the delay in the

¹⁷³ *The Northern Constitution*, 12 May 1923.

¹⁷⁴ *The Irish News*, 14 May 1923.

¹⁷⁵ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-'27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. Report of a meeting in Enniskillen on 16 April).

¹⁷⁶ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 38.

¹⁷⁷ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-'27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. Inspector General's office, RUC, Belfast. 7 Nov. 1923).

establishment of the Commission prevented nationalist representatives from taking any steps.

When the Commission finally started its work in autumn 1924, it became evident that the transfer of big portions of northern territory to the Free State was unlikely, since commissioners seemed interested only in small areas close to the border. This encouraged nationalist leaders to endorse recognition with increasing enthusiasm. In November 1924, during a meeting in Sixmilecross (Tyrone) John Skeffington, Secretary of the County Board, complained that Catholics' interests were being ruined in local boards that were controlled by unionists, while Nugent wrote "there is a general cry that the lost ground must be recovered as soon as possible".¹⁷⁸ Before the general elections of April 1925, Devlin and other nationalist leaders met with representatives of the pro-Treaty republicans, and agreed to propose six candidates on each side. Those elected, except for representatives of Belfast and Antrim, were supposed to wait for the Commission to publish its report before taking their seats. Subsequently, they were to organise local conventions to decide between abstention and recognition.¹⁷⁹ Elections saw the victory of eleven nationalists, and Devlin, elected in West Belfast, announced that he would take his seat together with T. S. McAllister, elected in Antrim. Other nationalists did not enter parliament since they were elected in constituencies that, unlike Belfast and Antrim, might have been affected by the Commission.¹⁸⁰

When leaked notes of the Commission's report were published by the *Morning Post*, Hibernians reacted with indignation, in particular in the Free State, where they threatened to take action if the government allowed the transfer of southern territory to Northern Ireland. Donegal County Board approved a resolution inviting members not to take the partition of their county lying down. Monaghan County Council pledged resistance to any attempt to dismember theirs or Donegal's territory, or "to bind in perpetual bondage, in defiance of the wishes of the inhabitants, large areas of Down, Fermanagh and Derry".¹⁸¹ Shortly after the failure of the Commission, rumours circulated according to which the Free State was ready to abolish the customs barrier with Northern Ireland. Ballybofey (Donegal)

¹⁷⁸ *The Belfast Telegraph*, 15 September 1924; *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1924.

¹⁷⁹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 318-9.

¹⁸⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast 1994), pp. 318-22.

¹⁸¹ *The Hibernian Journal*, December 1925.

division protested against any attempt to remove the barrier “so long as the Catholics and nationalists of the Six Counties are deprived of the rights acknowledged and freely accorded to the minority in the South”.¹⁸² This and other initiatives prompted the response of the Free State government, which guaranteed that there would be no attempts to remove the barrier. After this episode, Nugent enthusiastically wrote in the *Journal* that Ulster nationalists were not going to be abandoned by fellow countrymen in the South. Although he admitted that the barrier created inconvenience to trade along the border, he believed that:

it would simply cap the climax for the Free State government, after deserting the northern nationalists, to make easy the paths of Derry and Belfast merchants to the business and pockets of the people of the south and west they have been so loudly professing to despise. The barriers have been created by the northern unionists themselves, and we hope that they will be preserved until those now opposed to them display a more Christian and patriotic feeling towards their fellow countrymen across the border.¹⁸³

These few lines show that the Order’s leadership had adopted a partitionist mentality, and that they felt alienated from the unionists in the North, as well as from the government in the South.

Nevertheless, Devlin and his closest supporters tried to persuade nationalist opinion of the necessity to co-operate with northern authorities to redress their grievances, since they saw no reason to continue with the non-recognition policy after the failure of the Commission. As an expert politician, Devlin was aware of the unlikelihood of obtaining major concessions from the northern government. Even if all Catholic representatives took their seats, unionists would still have a solid majority. However, Devlin believed that “as Catholics, we have to discharge all the duties of citizenship. Consequently, we should claim and exercise all the privileges of citizenship”.¹⁸⁴

Hibernian demonstrations on St Patrick’s Day provided them with a platform to deliver their message. In Coalisland (Tyrone), the speaker, J. P. O’Kane, said that they were all Ulstermen

¹⁸² *The Donegal News and Derry People*, 6 February 1926.

¹⁸³ *The Hibernian Journal*, March 1926.

¹⁸⁴ NAI, LOU 13/1/3 (a) (Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, Friendly Society. Meeting of the National Board, 3 Mar. 1927, Dublin).

and proud of it, and that they should have a chance to do their part to make Ulster a centre of industry. In Armoy (Antrim), Devlin emphasized the oneness of Ireland, but invited Catholics to deal with the reality of two parliaments in the country. He stressed that his attendance of the Belfast parliament had produced results, since he and McAllister had forced the northern government to deal with issues such as unemployment and the provision of pensions for widows and orphans.¹⁸⁵

In early 1926, two nationalist MPs joined Devlin and McAllister in the Belfast parliament. George Leeke, elected in Derry city, was a Justice of the Peace and prominent Hibernian. He had been returned in the same constituency in 1921, and was a member of the deputation of northern nationalists that met Eoin MacNeill to clarify the position of the Six Counties after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. He was very sceptical about the southern commitment to ending partition, and remained a loyal Devlinite. This did not prevent him from submitting evidence to the Boundary Commission, together with other representatives of the nationalist population in border areas, such as John Henry Collins, Archdeacon John Tierney and Patrick Lavery.¹⁸⁶ However, he believed that his supporters would not benefit from his abstention after any chances of transfer to the Free State had been dashed.¹⁸⁷ He took his seat with Patrick O'Neill, nationalist representative of South Down, a constituency he retained since 1921. He too had submitted evidence to the Commission suggesting a new boundary line leaving outside the Saorstát those electoral divisions in South Down that were predominantly Protestant (Killylea, Kilinchey, Crossgar), and served by the market town of Ballynahinch in Northern Ireland.¹⁸⁸ However, he was happy to enter the Belfast parliament after several meetings in his constituency rejected abstention.¹⁸⁹

Hibernian committees of Coalisland, Dungannon and Sixmilecross (Tyrone) adopted resolutions asking Tyrone and Fermanagh nationalist representatives in the Belfast parliament to take their seats, and calling on those who refused to resign.¹⁹⁰ However,

¹⁸⁵ *The Hibernian Journal*, April 1926.

¹⁸⁶ NAI, NEBB/4/3/1 (Statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Map and letter to the Irish Boundary Commission by people representing majorities in all areas affected and shown to the South and West of the line of the enclosed map).

¹⁸⁷ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 339.

¹⁸⁸ NAI, NEBB 4/3/13 (Statements sent to Commission from local Arms. Proposed evidence of J. Henry Collins member of the firm Collins & Collins, Solicitors, Newry).

¹⁸⁹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 339.

¹⁹⁰ *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1927.

conventions in Tyrone and Fermanagh chose to continue the non-recognition policy, and representatives of the two counties, Alex Donnelly, Thomas Harbison, Cahir Healy and John McHugh, abstained from parliament. John Henry Collins, elected in Armagh, was prevented from taking his seat by the Nationalist Defence Association, which enjoyed strong support in Newry and South Armagh.¹⁹¹

The main argument abstentionists put forward against Devlin was that recognising the authority of the Belfast parliament would not benefit the nationalist population unless proportional representation was reintroduced for local elections, and gerrymandering abolished. They argued that all nationalist MPs should abstain and demand the abolition of these disabilities in exchange for their co-operation.¹⁹² Although abstentionists constituted a minority, they counted many followers among die-hard republicans disappointed in the Free State government and opposed to Devlin. Not only did they reject the Belfast parliament, but they also supported abstention from Westminster. When Cahir Healy, despite boycotting the Belfast parliament, took his seat in Westminster as Fermanagh and Tyrone MP in 1924, the *Éire*, official organ of the Irish Republican Party, condemned his choice as “fruitless apostasy”.¹⁹³ Healy entered parliament with the support of the Free State in order to bring the boundary question to the attention of the British. However, according to the *Éire*, his presence in Westminster was irrelevant because “a minority in a foreign assembly, be its numbers three or eighty, is literally the voice of one crying in the wilderness”.¹⁹⁴

Between 1926 and 1927, the AOH campaigned relentlessly against abstention. Not only did the *Journal* repeatedly stress the advantages of parliamentary attendance, but speeches became more and more aggressive during Hibernian demonstrations. In March 1927, the RUC reported, not without surprise, that Hibernians addressing the audience in Dungannon used a more violent language than usual, and they called Sinn Féiners “murder gangs”.¹⁹⁵ Abstentionism prevented the creation of a united nationalist front that Devlin believed to be the only way to challenge the unionist monopoly of power in Northern Ireland. However, abstentionism was not the only obstacle. Northern nationalists were growing disillusioned

¹⁹¹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 340.

¹⁹² *The Ulster Herald*, 27 February 1926.

¹⁹³ *Éire*, 29 March 1924.

¹⁹⁴ *Éire*, 29 March 1924.

¹⁹⁵ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-'27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland. Letter from Inspector General's Office, RUC, to the Ministry of Home Affairs, 23 Mar. 1927).

with the prospect of co-operating with the unionist authorities to ensure equal treatment. For example, a meeting in Bellaghy (Londonderry), where George Leeke announced his intention to take his seat, was “poorly patronised, a fact which would lead one to understand that the people are not as enthusiastic about politics as they were in the past”.¹⁹⁶

Despite the strong opposition of extreme sections, and widespread apathy among Catholics, by the end of 1927 abstentionist MPs had taken their seats in the Belfast parliament. This was not only the result of the Hibernian campaign, but also of events in the Free State. After the assassination of Kevin O’Higgins, Minister for Justice, in July, the government enforced emergency legislation imposing the Oath to all elected members of parliament, otherwise they would be disqualified.¹⁹⁷ De Valera and Fianna Fáil MPs resolved to take the Oath, conveniently dismissed as an empty formula, and entered the Dáil.

In the North, Hibernians exploited these events to insist on the failure of the abstention policy. After private meetings and public consultations in their respective constituencies, four of the five abstentionist MPs entered the Belfast parliament, although not as a united body and at different times. Only the anti-Treaty MP for Armagh, Eamon Donnelly, refused to take his seat as he declined to recognise the state of Northern Ireland.¹⁹⁸

The fact that the four MPs did not agree on a common time to enter parliament together contributed to convince Devlin of the necessity of an organisation that could reconcile the different shades of nationalist opinion. This became more urgent after Craig disclosed his project to abolish proportional representation for parliamentary elections. The *Journal* tried to shake nationalists from apathy by inviting them to face reality, “and the reality is that Partition exists and only a union of all the Catholic and Nationalist forces can save our people from oppression and secure for them, at least, that modicum of fair play which representation in proportion to their numbers can secure”.¹⁹⁹ Finally, in May 1928, Devlin

¹⁹⁶ PRONI, HA/32/1/321 (Reports of meetings of AOH, 1922-’27. Minister of Home Affairs, Government of Northern Ireland Report from Inspector General’s Office RUC, to Ministry of Home Affairs, 18 Feb. 1926).

¹⁹⁷ F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London, 1963), p. 498.

¹⁹⁸ P. J. Dempsey, ‘Donnelly, Eamon’, DIB.

¹⁹⁹ *The Hibernian Journal*, April 1928.

presided over a meeting of northern MPs, nationalist representatives in local boards and priests, during which he officially launched the National League of the North.²⁰⁰

The organisation was responsible for the choice of local and national candidates, and conducted registration work. There was a central council with 44 members, county committees and parish branches. Devlin was president of the League, Archdeacon Tierney vice-president, Cahir Healy and Patrick O'Neill joint secretaries. Healy, originally a staunch republican, had been disappointed by the Free State's handling of the Boundary Commission and, after 1925, he supported a policy of reconciliation between Sinn Féin and the Nationalist Party. He became a close ally of Joe Devlin, whom he replaced as party leader after his death in 1934.²⁰¹

Hibernians welcomed the new organisation and its democratic character, stressing that it represented different political and religious creeds under the common goals of Irish unity and fair play for all.²⁰² Although they actively engaged in recruitment, they struggled against the apathy of northern Catholics.²⁰³ However, it seemed that the League was capable of conciliating old rivalries. During the 15 August Hibernian demonstration in Keady, John Henry Collins, who had always been very critical of the AOH, appeared to address the audience.²⁰⁴ Cahir Healy not only agreed to work with a loyal Devlinite such as O'Neill, but also became secretary of the Enniskillen branch of the League. Records of this branch confirm that Hibernians held positions within the League.²⁰⁵ For example, James Gilgunn, the Order's county president, was a member of the East Ward committee.

A significant number of women were involved in the National League in Enniskillen, but, since there are no registers of the Ladies' Auxiliaries, it is not possible to determine if they were Hibernians. Membership of the Ladies' Auxiliaries traditionally offered few chances of political involvement, despite the fact that Joe Devlin had always been in favour of women's suffrage. In 1918, Ladies' divisions greatly contributed to Devlin's electoral campaign in

²⁰⁰ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 359.

²⁰¹ E. Phoenix, 'Healy, Cahir', DIB.

²⁰² *The Hibernian Journal*, August 1928.

²⁰³ *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1928.

²⁰⁴ *The Hibernian Journal*, September 1928.

²⁰⁵ PRONI, D2991/B/1/23 (Cahir Healy papers. National League of the North. 1928. Enniskillen branch. Minutes).

Belfast, but their role was generally intended to be as a support to male divisions.²⁰⁶ In Enniskillen, five women were seated in the General Committee, which counted twelve members, between 1930 and 1932.²⁰⁷ Almost all the women in Enniskillen National League were married to male members, as records show that they often shared the same family names.

Healy's records of the Enniskillen branch show that the committees did not only select nationalist candidates, but dealt with all aspects of the elections: they made lists of available cars for the polling day, and arranged a collection for registration and election expenses. Moreover, the League, like the AOH, offered an opportunity for discussion of current issues, such as the education question, cuts in teachers' salaries, and Customs Union between Northern Ireland and Free State.

There are no records of the total number of members of the League. In Enniskillen in December 1928, 78 new members joined the League. In May 1930 and 1931, Healy reported that meetings registered a good attendance. However, two years after the League's launch, the AOH recognised that the organisation had made very little progress, and that Hibernians could no longer raise the same enthusiasm that existed before the last troubled fifteen years. Despite the involvement of Cahir Healy and other ex-republicans, such as J. H. Collins and Donnelly, the League was dominated by Devlinites. Devlin himself could not contribute with his own charisma, as his health problems prevented him from engaging in politics for a while. The *Journal* attributed the failure of the League to attract wide support to the Irish people's tendency to forget sacrifices of unselfish labours for patriotic ends. Older men had grown up in an era of new hopes, and they had to make allowances for the younger generation whose formative years were characterised by violence, partisanship and disillusionment.²⁰⁸

The Hibernians' loss of influence within the northern Catholic community was not only a consequence of divisions within the minority. Despite the abolition of PR for parliamentary elections in 1929, nationalists won eleven seats at the elections, although the combined

²⁰⁶ S. Paseta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 254.

²⁰⁷ PRONI, D2991/B/1/23 (Cahir Healy papers. National League of the North. 1928. Enniskillen branch. Minutes).

²⁰⁸ *The Hibernian Journal*, October 1930.

opposition in parliament lost six deputies, passing from twenty to fourteen.²⁰⁹ In the same year, the two candidates of the National League for Fermanagh-Tyrone, Devlin and Harbison, were elected to Westminster. However, nationalists failed to gain a hearing for Catholic grievances in the Belfast parliament, and did not gain major concessions in terms of education and social policy.

On 11 May 1932, Devlin and his nationalist colleagues walked out of the Belfast parliament in protest against the speaker's ruling during the budget discussion, since the opposition was denied the opportunity to study the figures contained in the financial report.²¹⁰

Nationalist MPs issued a statement saying that no useful purpose could be served by a continuance of the debate, and they hoped that their actions would draw public attention to the scandal of people's representatives being denied the right to discuss how they were to be taxed. Devlin, who died in January 1934, never returned to parliament, and most of the nationalist MPs continued to abstain until 1935.

Two months before withdrawing from parliament, during a debate on economic protection, Devlin made a speech expressing his sense of frustration and regret for the lost opportunity of inter-communal co-operation:

I regret profoundly all this condition of affairs. I would like to see this Province prosper. The resentment is founded largely upon the mishandling of the situation. You have a small population of one and a quarter million people covering a very limited space. You have considerable intelligence. You had opponents willing to co-operate. We did not seek office. We sought service. We were willing to help. But you rejected all friendly offers. You refused to accept co-operation. If you could come now and perhaps justify and vindicate your attitude, if you came and told us that all goes well in Northern Ireland, I would say, "We were all wrong; you were all right; you had no right to consider us; you had no right to seek co-operation; you had a right to reject the friendly offers we made", but no, you regard yourselves as a little band of supermen.²¹¹

The decision to withdraw from parliament was not only a consequence of unionists'

²⁰⁹ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast 1994), p. 364.

²¹⁰ *The Irish News*, 11 May 1932.

²¹¹ Stormont papers, Vol. 14, col. 44. 8 March 1932.

rejection of co-operation with nationalists. Fianna Fáil had won the elections in February that year, and many in the North looked at de Valera and his government hoping for help. Moreover, republicans were reorganising in the Free State and in Northern Ireland. These events likely contributed to Devlin's decision.²¹²

The 1932 summer was particularly difficult for the minority. At the end of June, northern Catholics travelling to Dublin for the Eucharistic Congress were attacked all across the Six Counties. Catholic shops were looted in Derry, buses carrying pilgrims had their windows smashed in Coleraine, a train of priests was attacked in Portadown, and incidents occurred in Belfast. Although the government and the Grand Orange Lodge condemned these episodes, in July and August, several Hibernian demonstrations were cancelled due to the opposition of Orange groups.²¹³

In the meantime, AOH Provincial Boards encouraged the formation of committees assisting counties on both sides of the border in the organisation of joint events. In particular, they recommended the association of Donegal and Derry; Leitrim and Cavan should link up with Fermanagh; and finally Louth with Armagh and Down.²¹⁴ Hibernian leaders were strengthening cross-border relations in an attempt to increase their influence in the Free State, and raise the northern question. After years lamenting the lack of interest in the minority by southern leaders, Nugent finally wrote:

it has often been said, and unhappily not without ample justification, that the people in the Free State have not taken an intelligent and sympathetic interest in the sad fate of the minority sold into captivity in the North; but on the other hand, what has the North done to impress on the people in the Saorstát the evils they are forced to endure and the moral responsibility that rests on those who perorate about national unity but do little or nothing to keep the enslavement of the Six Counties a burning question?²¹⁵

These few lines appear like an admission that the recognition policy, so long advocated by Hibernians, had failed, and once again, hope of redress for the minority rested within the

²¹² E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* (Belfast, 1994), p. 369.

²¹³ *The Hibernian Journal*, September 1932.

²¹⁴ *The Hibernian Journal*, November 1932.

²¹⁵ *The Hibernian Journal*, February 1933.

Free State. Nugent recognised some degree of responsibility by northern nationalists for the southern lack of interest in their situation. This may suggest that he believed that a new strategy in this respect could change the situation in the future.

- **Conclusion**

The early years of Northern Ireland saw a crisis of traditional representative democracy since the sectarian attitude of unionist authorities and the abstention policy adopted by Catholic representatives significantly undermined the possibility of exercising political rights through voting. The Ancient Order of Hibernians provided alternative forms of political participation, contributing to the maintenance of some degree of political involvement among northern Catholics. The Order's meetings constituted an important opportunity for nationalist leaders to deliver their message and reach their audience. The AOH maintained some degree of political involvement among the minority, and contributed to the gradual recognition of the state of Northern Ireland.

As an all-Ireland organisation, the AOH assured the maintenance of cross-border relations, since Hibernians travelled across the border to demonstrations, meeting fellow members from both states. The *Hibernian Journal*, official publication of the AOH, was regularly read during meetings, and it kept audiences north and south informed about the situation of their neighbours.

However, the AOH's outreach was limited because, since 1916, as official organisation of the Irish Parliamentary Party, it suffered the decline of constitutional nationalism and the rise of republicanism in Ireland. Although the Order survived and managed to reorganise itself, it failed to attract the young generations. In the Free State, the Order's detachment from political parties deprived it of the capacity of providing its members with jobs, thus diminishing its appeal. As the Board of Erin noted, they could no longer compete against other political forces, such as Cumann na nGaedheal, because they had jobs to distribute.²¹⁶ In Northern Ireland, the decline of the IPP, the rise of republicanism and its engagement in

²¹⁶ NAI, LOU 13/1/3 (a) (Ancient Order of Hibernians, Board of Erin, Friendly Society. Meeting of the National Board, 3 Mar. 1927, Dublin).

the war against British rule persuaded a significant number of Hibernians to leave the Order and join the IRA. After partition, what was left of the organisation lacked the strength to confront Orangeism, while Devlin repudiated violence. Hibernianism no longer offered young Catholics the opportunity to fight Orangemen.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of partition, northern Catholics found themselves politically marginalised. As outlined in chapter one, the unionist government tried to persuade representatives of the minority to contribute to the legislative process, but at the same time tolerated abuses perpetrated by the police forces. Authorities were not always ill-disposed towards Catholics. For example, they admitted that Hibernians were not a threat and even established cordial relations. In general, however, Catholics were treated as second-class citizens. As the expulsions of summer 1920 showed, Protestants intended Northern Ireland as a state for themselves, and expected their requests to be prioritised at the expenses of Catholics if necessary. Since the Belfast government needed the support of Protestant labourers, the expulsions resulted in the latter being incorporated into the majoritarian Northern Ireland State. While state-building elites afforded settler labour a privileged position, the minority was inevitably left out.

In order to understand the political experience of the minority in Northern Ireland, it is fundamental to place nationalist politics in a 32 counties context. Since Catholics in Northern Ireland felt part of the same national community represented by the Free State government, they naturally sought the support of the southern authorities and population. As illustrated in chapters two and three, not only did Sinn Féin never formulate proposals alternative to partition, but the Free State government failed to develop a consistent policy towards Northern Ireland. This was also due to the fact that the Free State government never came under pressure from public opinion in this respect. The Ulster question was occasionally revived by news of sectarian violence in the North, which encouraged popular displays of solidarity in the form, for example, of boycott initiatives, but was otherwise ignored. Southern politicians mainly used the Ulster question as a propaganda device, while inconsistencies and contradictions in the Free State's northern policy contributed to undermining the effectiveness of Catholics' political representation in Northern Ireland.

Not only did northern Catholics have to deal with a hostile government steadily held by the unionist bloc, and the lack of support and direction from the South, but they had to manage without a common policy. Their representatives were divided between constitutional

nationalists and republicans and, as described in chapter four, it took years before they reconciled. At local level, this antagonism often split rural and urban councils, allowing unionists to take control of areas where they were in a minority. At national level, it delayed the recognition of the Belfast government, increasing uncertainty and weakening opposition to unionism. As described in chapter one, the Church contributed to Catholics' alienation with its uncompromising attitude.

Immediately after partition, the abstention policy deprived northern Catholics of the opportunity to exercise their political rights through voting. As nationalists gradually took their seats in the parliament, it became clear that they had no chances to counteract their opponents. Despite disillusion and apathy, Catholics found alternative ways to participate politically and make their voices heard.

At the peak of sectarian violence, boycotting goods produced in Belfast and other towns where expulsions took place was a largely non-violent response not only to discrimination against Catholics, but also to the partition project. In retrospect, the Belfast boycott has been judged as a mistake not only because it did not achieve any of its goals, but also because it worsened inter-community relations in Northern Ireland and strengthened the perception of the six counties as a separate entity. In some cases, it degenerated into ostracism of Protestants, while in others the IRA forced people to boycott some products. However, it is unquestionable that by adhering to the boycott, people expressed their political views.

The statements for the Boundary Commission were compiled in a hostile atmosphere, with RUC officers infiltrating nationalist meetings and the government openly rejecting the commission itself. Nevertheless, many Catholics actively engaged in the preparations for the commission by attending meetings, releasing statements and volunteering for the hearings. It is true that, as for example in South Down and Armagh, it was the zeal of agents of the NEBB more than popular enthusiasm for the commission that produced large quantities of statements. However, it is remarkable that local agents, without the strong support of political leaders who were, as stressed in chapter three, very cautious about the commission, managed to get dozens of individuals actively involved.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians was the only Catholic organisation able to mobilise significant numbers of people. Considering the dramatic downfall of the Parliamentary Party after 1916, the Order's survival and modest recovery indicate that there was still some space in the Catholic community for a faith-based association promoting political engagement. However, there were, as outlined in chapter four, various reasons for people to join the Order and attend demonstrations. Being a Hibernian did not necessarily mean political engagement, but participation to the Order's activities implied some exposure to political discourses. Hibernian officers actively engaged in politics by helping with electioneering and registration, as well as the creation of the National League of the North. Moreover, the Order acted as an intermediary between high politics and common citizens by conveying political information and promoting cross-border relations.

The case studies here analysed contribute to the reassessment of the experience of the minority in the formative years of Northern Ireland, highlighting how a potential to politically engage Catholics went lost. Boycotting Belfast goods, writing statements of evidence for the Boundary Commission and engaging in Hibernian activities were accessible ways to participate to politics at a time when voting and party activities were ineffective. However, these case-studies had never been considered as participatory actions by historians and political scientists. The accounts provided by the main scholars of nationalist politics in 1920s Northern Ireland, Phoenix, Staunton and Hepburn, are incomplete not simply because they tend to focus on high politics, but also because they fail to realise that activities such voting and participating in party politics were not indicative of Catholics' political engagement. These actions are normally aimed at influencing state politics and thus their significance in a context of uncoupling between citizens and state is diminished.

As stated in the Introduction, for northern Catholics voting represented a means to express their identity and their belonging to a community, rather than their political views. Voting for a party did not necessarily imply support to its programme, which is confirmed by the fact that at every election between 1921 and 1972 the vast majority of northern Catholics always voted for the Nationalist Party or for Sinn Féin. This suggests that considering voting as the most meaningful form of political participation is insufficient to a full understanding of the experience of the minority in post-partition Northern Ireland.

Although historians do not consider northern Catholics as a monolithic bloc, they generally distinguish different groups based on their political orientation. Most of the dynamics internal to the Catholic community are explained in terms of antagonism between republicans and constitutional nationalists. For example, Hepburn does grasp the complexity and contradictions within the AOH, but he is more interested in analysing the use that Devlin made of the organisation and how it initially undermined the establishment of Sinn Féin clubs in Ulster countryside, rather than its role within the minority after partition. Staunton focuses on the negative reputation of Hibernians among republicans, while Phoenix seems to consider the influence of the AOH on nationalist politics in the late 1930s as evidence of the almost disappearance of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. The present work adds nuances to the widespread interpretation of northern Catholics as divided between republicans and constitutional nationalists by examining how different political interests were shaped by factors such as geography, age group and class.

The analysis of previously unexplored sources such as the *Hibernian Journal* has allowed us to realise the importance of the generational change in the decline of the AOH, which is significant not only from a political but also a cultural point of view. It was not only the decline of constitutional nationalism in the Free State and the alienation of the minority in Northern Ireland that distanced the young generations from Hibernianism, but also the emergence and popularity of new forms of entertainment that the AOH refused to provide. The statements of evidence to the Boundary Commission, largely overlooked by historians, shows how the economic situation of the witnesses, as well as the NEBB agents' reputation within their communities and their various approaches to their task, shaped responses to partition, downplaying the role of politics. Finally, local lists of boycotted goods and correspondence between citizens and Dublin government, never studied before, add complexity to the Belfast boycott. They shed light on the various reasons why people and businesses were boycotted in different areas, and in general contribute significantly to an understanding of the Anglo-Irish war at local level.

On the other hand, northern Catholics have often been studied from the point of view of their antagonism with unionists. For example, Staunton only mentions the Belfast boycott in relation to the first Craig-Collins Pact, and stresses that it was aimed at strengthening the Catholic community in the North by damaging unionists' business and trade. The analysis

here presented goes beyond the narrative of polarised politics in Northern Ireland by stressing the existence of dialogue rather than confrontation, as in the case of education reforms, as well as toleration and cordial relations, such as in the case of the AOH. By drawing attention to these events, the study of alternative forms of political participation ultimately contributes to a reassessment of inter-community relations.

The failure of historians to engage with non-traditional politics might be due not only to a narrow and conservative definition of the subject, but also to the difficulty in finding adequate sources. Since those engaging in politics in alternative ways had no membership identification, this thesis has made use of new primary material ranging from boycott lists and police reports on the Boundary Commission activities, to minutes of meetings of the Board of Erin and statements from the Bureau of Military History. However, there are aspects of the narrative presented here that remain neglected or incomplete because of the lack or inaccessibility of some sources. In particular, some of the material about the B-Specials in PRONI is not available for consultation, and, as already explained in chapter four, no records of Hibernian membership survive. It is also regrettable that there is little information about common people who participated in the Belfast boycott since, for example, there are no letters to local press or private memoirs mentioning it, but only statements to the Bureau of Military History and a few letters to the Free State government from shop owners.

Future research would try to assess the extent of the decline of traditional politics by looking at trends in the number of office seekers, particularly in local elections, after the end of the abstention policy. The analysis of newspapers' sales would help to verify a decline of interest in public affairs, thus contributing to complete the context in which the three main case studies here examined are set. Reference to contemporary situations of minorities in the rest of Europe, such as the Germans in Alsace or the Austrians in South Tyrol, would shed light on the different responses that policies of segregation or assimilation generated, helping to reassess Ireland's exceptionalism.

One important category overlooked in the present work is gender. Women's almost complete absence from this thesis is due to lack of data from the primary sources under consideration. A few women, members of Cumann na mBam, helped to implement the Belfast boycott, but no statements of evidence were produced by women. Although the

Ladies' Auxiliaries were part of the AOH, very little attention is devoted to their activities in the sources here examined. Further investigation is required to understand the political experience of Catholic women in Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1932.

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