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Understanding the Ulster Covenant





Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant.

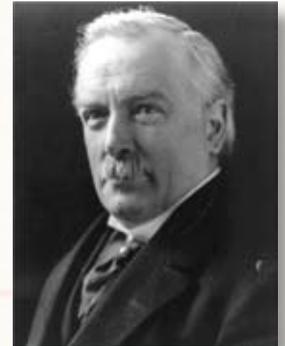
Being convinced in our consciences that Home Rule would be disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as of the whole of Ireland, subversive of our civil and religious freedom, destructive of our citizenship and perilous to the unity of the Empire, we, whose names are underwritten, men of Ulster, loyal subjects of His Gracious Majesty King George V., humbly relying on the God whom our fathers in days of stress and trial confidently trusted, do hereby pledge ourselves in solemn Covenant throughout this our time of threatened calamity to stand by one another in defending for ourselves and our children our cherished position of equal citizenship in the United Kingdom and in using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland. ¶ And in the event of such a Parliament being forced upon us we further solemnly and mutually pledge ourselves to refuse to recognise its authority. ¶ In sure confidence that God will defend the right we hereto subscribe our names. ¶ And further, we individually declare that we have not already signed this Covenant.

The above was signed by me at _____
"Ulster Day," Saturday, 28th September, 1912.

God Save the King.

Introduction

At the beginning of 1909 there was nothing to suggest that the Irish problem was about to enter its most acute phase but on 30 November 1909 the Unionist majority in the House of Lords rejected Lloyd George's radical budget (which its author described as 'the People's Budget') by 350 votes to 75. Contrary to British constitutional convention, Unionists had employed their huge majority in the Lords to vote down the Liberal Government's budget, the first time since the seventeenth century that the Lords had challenged the House of Commons' power of the purse. This event precipitated two general elections and a series of political crises which merged into each other and produced the third Home Rule crisis in the years immediately before the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914.



Lloyd George



Finding itself utterly dependent on the votes of Irish Nationalist MPs after the two General Elections of January and December 1910, Asquith's Liberal government entered into a compact with the Irish Nationalist MPs whereby in return for their parliamentary support the Government would introduce a Home Rule Bill establishing a separate Irish Parliament in Dublin.

Irish Unionists, who would be the sacrificial victims of such a policy, viewed this prospect with horror. To both British and Irish Unionists the Government was embarking upon the dismemberment of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, Home Rule threatened the very foundations of the British Empire. Home Rule was no trivial issue in British politics.



Carson signing the Covenant at the City Hall

There had been previous Home Rule crises firstly in 1886, then in 1892-93 when Home Rule had secured a majority in the House of Commons, but was rejected in the House of Lords. The Lords became identified as a bulwark of the Union and gave Unionists a sense of security. However, the Parliament Act of 1911 drastically reduced the powers of the Lords and deprived the upper chamber of its veto, replacing it with merely the power to delay. The upper chamber could no longer be relied upon to block Home Rule in the future. New methods would have to be explored and found to persuade Liberals and Nationalists that Unionists would neither acquiesce in, nor submit to, Dublin Rule.

The Third Home Rule Crisis was deeper, more protracted and bitter than the previous two crises because Unionists feared that Home Rule was inevitable. Furthermore, Unionists felt so strongly about Home Rule that, if necessary, they would be justified in resisting it by force of arms.

On 28 September 1912 Ulster Unionists eloquently set out the basis of their opposition to Home Rule in a document, Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant. In Ulster 218,206 men signed the Covenant and 228,981 women signed a parallel declaration associating 'with their menfolk' in 'their uncompromising opposition to the Home Rule now before Parliament'.

All over Ulster, Volunteers had sprung into existence to demonstrate their resolute opposition to Home Rule, largely as the result of local Orange

Order initiative. Because there was no overall command structure or province-wide organisation, in January 1913 the Ulster Unionist Council decided that the Ulster Volunteers should be united into a single body known as the Ulster Volunteer Force.

In January 1914 Carson and the Unionist leadership demonstrated that they were serious in their opposition when they sanctioned Major Frederick Crawford's daring mission to Germany to purchase guns and ammunition and land them in Ulster. On the night 24/25 April 35,000 rifles and 3,000,000 rounds of ammunition were successfully unloaded at Larne, Bangor and Donaghadee and swiftly and efficiently distributed to the UVF across the province.

By the early summer of 1914 the Home Rule Bill edged closer to the Statute Book and on 10 July the Provisional Government of Ulster was about to assume responsibility for governance of the province.

To many observers, but for the outbreak of the Great War in Europe, civil war in Ireland was inevitable.

The Origins and Background to the Ulster Covenant

In everyday speech a 'covenant' is a bargain or an agreement. Lawyers regard a covenant as an agreement concluded under seal. Theologians and Biblical scholars point out that the concept of a covenant is one of the fundamental theological motifs of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, with divine promise on one hand and human obligations on the other. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for covenant seems to have the root meaning of 'bond' or 'fetter', denoting a binding relationship.



Gun running at Donaghadee in April 1914



The inspection platform at Balmoral, Easter Tuesday 1912

On 23 September 1911, at the huge demonstration in the grounds of James Craig's house, Craigavon, in east Belfast, Sir Edward Carson, the new Unionist leader, told his audience that he was entering into 'a compact', or bargain, with them. He continued, 'with the help of God you and I joined together – I giving you the best I can, and you giving all your strength behind me – we will yet defeat the most nefarious conspiracy that has ever been hatched against a free people'.

At the Balmoral demonstration on Easter Tuesday 1912, at which Bonar Law, the new leader of the Conservative Party, was the principal speaker, Carson, at the conclusion of his speech, invited everyone present to raise their hands and repeat after him, 'Never under any circumstances will we submit to Home Rule'. Law joined Carson in raising his hand to repeat Carson's pledge.

This piece of theatre gave the Unionist leadership the idea of an oath or pledge to resist Home Rule that would be taken by the entire Unionist population. James Craig was deputed to frame it.

Craig was struggling with the task in the Constitutional Club in London, when B. D. W. Montgomery, a Belfast businessman and secretary of the Ulster Club in Belfast, approached him and asked what he was doing. Craig explained his problem. Montgomery suggested having a look at the Scottish Covenant of 1581, a 'fine old document, full of grand phrases,



Signing Scotland's National Covenant, 1638

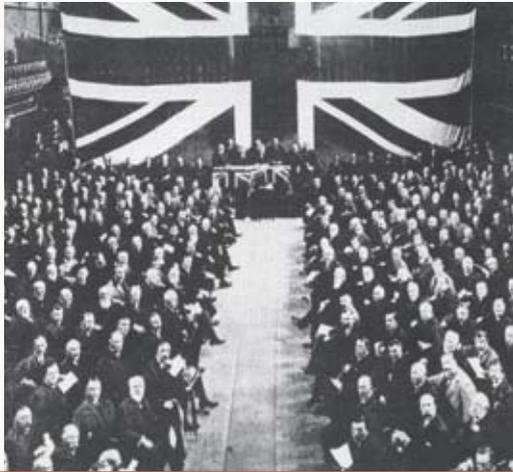
and thoroughly characteristic of the Ulster tone of mind at this day'.

Although on close scrutiny the text was not deemed appropriate, the document proved inspirational. The idea of what was to become Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant began to take shape. In the event Thomas Sinclair, leading Presbyterian layman, Ulster's foremost Liberal Unionist and Unionism's finest wordsmith, completed the task of drafting the Ulster Covenant. Sinclair took the title of the document from the Scottish Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 but its spirit from the Scottish National Covenant of 1638. It was not the first time that Sinclair had converted a good idea into a practical proposition. Twenty years earlier he had given form and shape to the idea of an Ulster Unionist Convention, and made it happen.

The Protestant churches were invited to comment on the text. The Presbyterian Church advised that the terms of the Covenant should be confined to 'the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule parliament in Ireland' rather than binding its signatories to opposition in perpetuity.

In August 1912 the text was forwarded to Carson who was holidaying in Bad Homburg, the famous German spa town near Frankfurt. Carson wrote to Craig on 21 August stating, 'I would not alter a word in the declaration which I consider excellent'.

On 19 September from the steps of Craigavon House, close to where he



The Ulster Unionist Council approves the Covenant Text, 23 September 1912

had addressed the huge demonstration almost exactly twelve months earlier, Carson read the text of the Covenant to assembled journalists. The Ulster Unionist Council approved the text on 23 September. Already, a campaign to promote the signing of the Covenant

on 28 September, designated 'Ulster Day', had commenced.

Beyond the immediate circumstances and events of the Third Home Rule Crisis, there was a wider cultural context to the Ulster Covenant. That the Ulster Covenant was inspired by the covenants of sixteenth and seventeenth century Scotland should not be surprising. Ulster is separated from Scotland by the narrow North Channel which is at one point only thirteen miles (twenty-one kilometres) wide. Historically, this channel has been a link rather than a barrier, and from the earliest times it has witnessed a constant traffic of peoples and ideas between the two coasts. Ulster and Scotland share a strong common Presbyterian heritage. Signatures were collected in Ulster as well as in Scotland for the Solemn League and Covenant of the 1640s. Men like Sinclair and Montgomery would have had an acute appreciation of this shared heritage. A poem by W. F. Marshall, entitled 'The Blue Banner', linking the Ulster Covenant and the struggles of the Scottish Covenanters, a theme to which he returned on a number of occasions, was published in the *Northern Whig* on Ulster Day, 28 September. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a heightened interest in Ulster-Scots history and culture evidenced by the publications on these themes by authors such as W. T. Latimer, J. B. Woodburn and Charles Hanna. The formation of the Presbyterian Historical Society in 1907 is further evidence of an increasing



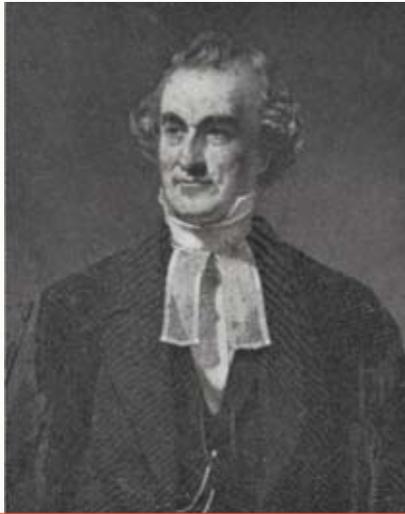
Unionist Convention 1892

appreciation of Ulster and Scotland's shared religious heritage.

The Covenant also drew on a long-standing tradition of the Ulster-British community 'banding' together, usually for mutual defence. In the 1640s the Laggan force in east Donegal banded together in defence of their homes and families against the insurgents of 1641. In 1688 and 1689, albeit less successfully in eastern Ulster, County Associations sprang into existence for essentially the same purpose. In 1778 the Volunteers came into existence to counter the threat of French invasion. After the Battle of the Diamond in September 1795 the Orange Order was formed for mutual defence and to defend Protestant interests. In 1892 the *Northern Whig* described the Ulster Unionist Convention as 'a bund [or band] the homogeneity of which nothing now can shake'. Just as the Ulster Unionist Convention came into existence to defend the Union, Ulstermen bound themselves to the defence of the Union by becoming signatories to the Covenant.

Why did Ulster Unionists oppose Home Rule?

There are many ways of answering this important question but one is to examine the text of the Ulster Covenant. Thomas Sinclair's text, particularly a number of key phrases, sets out the unionist case very succinctly.



Revd Henry Cooke

'Disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as the whole of Ireland'

Ulster (in practice Belfast, the Lagan Valley and an area within a 30-40 miles radius of Belfast) was the only part of the island to experience the full vigour of the Industrial Revolution. This set Ulster apart from the overwhelmingly agricultural south and west.

Unionists believed that Belfast and its environs not only flourished economically under the Union but that it flourished because of the Union.

As early as 1834 Emerson Tennent, who was one of Belfast's two MPs, eloquently countered Daniel O'Connell's speech in the House of Commons in favour of repeal of the Union with the observation: 'The north of Ireland had, every five years, found its trade doubled since the Union'. In 1841 Revd Dr Henry Cooke similarly repudiated O'Connell's case for repeal of the Union by recourse to Belfast's experience under the Union:

Look at the town of Belfast. When I myself was a youth I remember it almost a village. But what a glorious sight does it now present – the masted grove within our harbour – our mighty warehouses teeming with the wealth of every climate – our giant manufactories lifting themselves on every side – our streets marching on, as it were, with such rapidity that an absence of a few weeks makes us strangers in the outskirts of our town. And all this we owe to the Union... In one word more, I have done. Look at Belfast and be a Repealer, if you can.

When the Union came under threat from the mid 1880s onwards, Belfast Chamber of Commerce played an important role in combating the Home



The Islandmen pour out of Harland and Wolff

Rule threat. The Chamber stressed that Ulster's wealth and prosperity was due to the 'security and protection' afforded by Parliament since the Act of Union and the 'frugality and enterprise' of its people.

By the end of the nineteenth century Belfast was part of an industrial complex that stretched from Lancashire to Lanarkshire. In 1911 Philip Cambrai described it as 'one of the biggest, most energetic and commercially successful cities of the Empire'. By 1914 Belfast could boast 'the greatest shipyard, rope works, tobacco factory, linen mill, dry dock and tea machinery works in the world'. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Belfast had become one of the major industrial powerhouses of the world.

Ulster Unionists believed that Ulster's prosperity would be jeopardised by Home Rule. Unionists believed that nationalists would raise tariff barriers provoking retaliatory tariffs that would impede or exclude Ulster exports from overseas markets. Unionists believed that the overwhelmingly agricultural south and west would be unsympathetic to Ulster's industrial and commercial interests. They also feared that Ulster would be over taxed and would end up shouldering the burden of a Home Rule parliament's profligate expenditure.



Townsend Street Presbyterian Church

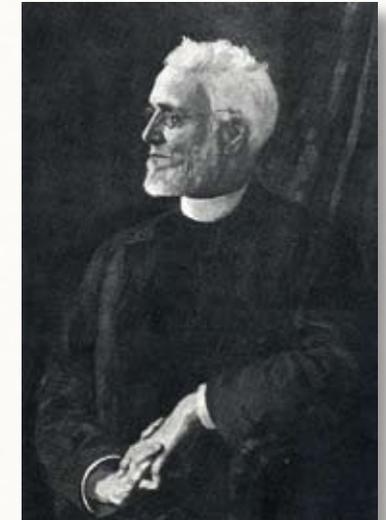
'Subversive of our civil and religious freedom'

In December 1912, as the third Home Rule crisis was unfolding, Father Gerald O'Nolan addressed Roman Catholic students at the Queen's University of Belfast, telling his audience:

We shall have a free hand in the future... Let us use it well. This is a Catholic country, and if we do not govern it on Catholic lines, according to Catholic ideals, and to safeguard Catholic interests, it will be all the worse for the country and all the worse for us.

As Unionists had long feared that a Home Rule parliament would be subject to strong clerical influence and that its legislation would be framed in conformity with Roman Catholic teaching, Father O'Nolan's remarks confirmed Ulster Protestants in their belief that 'Home Rule' would be indeed 'Rome rule'.

The issue of the *Ne temere* decree by Pius X in 1908 alarmed Ulster Protestants. It declared that marriages between Roman Catholics and Protestants not solemnised by the rites of the Roman Catholic Church were null and void. It also required the children of mixed marriages to be brought up as Roman Catholics. On 19 November 1910 the *Northern Whig* published a letter from Revd William Corkey, the minister of Townsend Street Presbyterian Church in Belfast, drawing attention to the plight of Mrs Agnes Jane McCann, the Presbyterian wife of Alexander

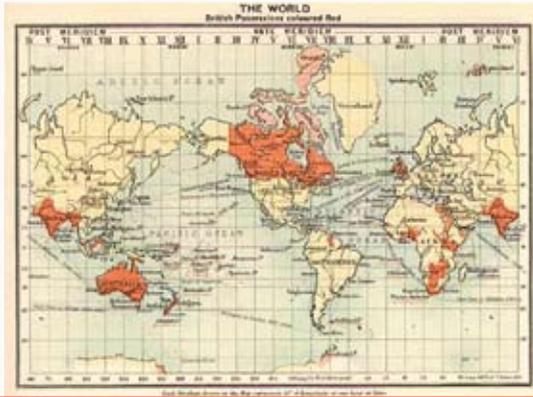


Revd J B Armour

McCann, a Belfast Roman Catholic, who had been deprived of her young children and deserted by her husband, as a result of her refusal to be married by a Roman Catholic priest in accordance with the decree. In February 1911 the McCann case was the subject of a debate in the House of Commons. In June 1911 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland debated the case and unanimously called (in vain) for the withdrawal of *Ne temere*.

Revd J.B. Armour, the Liberal Home Ruler, claimed that 'those who know the woman and her family history is that she is no great shakes and to use her case for purely political purpose shows the straits to which the Ulster Tories [by which he meant Unionists] are reduced'. However, few Ulster Protestants shared Armour's perspective. The comprehensive failure of Nationalist politicians to make any effort to allay Protestant concerns or to challenge the Roman Catholic Church on the issue did not assist the cause of Home Rule, a point that Augustine Birrell, the Chief Secretary, tried to impress upon John Dillon, the deputy leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party.

A second intervention by the Vatican, the issue of *Quantavis diligentia* (usually referred to in Ulster as *Motu proprio* which was strictly speaking the name of the type of directive rather than its actual title) in 1911, further damaged the prospect of Unionists being readily reconciled to Home Rule and fuelled Protestant anxieties. It condemned those who took priests to civil courts. *Quantavis diligentia* was interpreted to mean that Roman Catholic ecclesiastics were not subject to law. Although *Quantavis diligentia* did not apply to Ireland, the expectation was that it would eventually.



The British Empire

J. Milne Barbour, the President of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce, a substantial linen manufacturer and a future Northern Ireland Minister of Commerce, in giving evidence to the Primrose Commission on Irish Finance in 1913 was even prepared to concede that Ulster Unionist opposition to Home Rule was 'very largely religious'. However, many prominent Unionists would not have agreed with him. Thomas Sinclair and Ronald McNeill MP would have said that citizenship was at the heart of the matter.

'Destructive of our citizenship' and 'Equal citizenship'

In 1829 John Graham wrote in his *History of the Siege of Derry and Defence of Enniskillen*:

There is scarcely a blessing which the English dominions enjoy today, there is scarcely a blessing which England has diffused through other countries of the world, that was not secured by the revolution of 1688. And that revolution was secured by the defence of Derry.

John Graham anticipated by twenty or so years Macaulay's vastly more influential monumental *History of England* which gave Ulster Protestants a central place in the myth of the unfolding of the British Constitution. Unionists did not wish to be deprived of the benefits of the British constitution nor full representation in the United Kingdom Parliament. They had no wish to be represented in a subordinate parliament in which

they would be in a permanent minority.

'Perilous to the unity of the Empire'

In *Gladstone, Home Rule and the Ulster Question* (Dublin, 1986) James Loughlin noted that a recurring theme in Ulster Unionist speeches during 1886 – second only to the contention that home Rule would be Rome rule – was the assertion that 'Home Rule was inconsistent with Imperial integrity, and by relegating Ulster loyalists to representation by a subordinate parliament it would deprive them of their imperial heritage and reduce their status in the world'.

Alvin Jackson has written that unionists were 'bombarded at every stage in their lives and in every sphere of their activity with the image of the Empire'. However, Jackson claims that unionist pro-Imperialism was 'largely tactical and parochial'. James Loughlin disagrees but both Jackson and Loughlin agree that the Boer War marked 'a watershed in unionist political consciousness'. James Craig and R.H. Wallace both served in the Boer War, Wallace being the commander of the South Down Militia. Among Unionist politicians, in Jackson's view, 'fervent expressions of faith in the Imperial mission were not matched by action; they frequently demonstrated that their true political priorities had little to do with the future security of the Empire'.

Nevertheless, Ulstermen and women had played an important part in the acquisition, defence and administration of Empire. Here one might mention the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava whose statue stands outside the City Hall in Donegall Square West, Belfast; Brigadier John Nicholson who has statues erected in his honour in Market Square, Lisburn, and in



Brigadier John Nicholson



The leaders arrive at Belfast City Hall

the grounds of his *alma mater*, the Royal School, Dungannon, and the Lawrence brothers from Londonderry. In 1863 Sir John Lawrence became Viceroy of India. The Marquess of Dufferin and Ava was Viceroy of India from 1884 to 1888, having been previously Governor General of Canada. John Nicholson, a brigadier at the age of 35, was mortally wounded storming Delhi in September 1857. The tribesmen of the North West Frontier worshipped Nicholson as a god. Being an evangelical Protestant he had them flogged for their idolatry. Repeated flogging did deter them from their devotion.

During the course of 1912 William Ferguson Massey, originally from Limavady, became Prime Minister of New Zealand. Massey Avenue, near Stormont, is named after him. Another Ulsterman, John Balance, originally from Glenavy, had been Prime Minister of New Zealand between 1891 and 1893. Balance's sympathies, however, had been with Home Rule.

Many families would have had relations either working in the Empire or who had migrated and settled in various parts of the Empire.

Not everyone would have prospered to the extent of Samuel McCaughey, one of the wealthiest men in Australia and 'the King of Sheep'. He originally emigrated to Australia from Ballymena. He was one of those who bankrolled the Larne gunrunning. William Black of Ballyleck, a Vice-President of North Monaghan Unionist Association, made his more modest fortune



Looking down Donegall Place towards Royal Avenue

in South Africa and had returned to settle in his native county.

The Orange and the Black Institutions provided a network within the Empire. Money and messages of support for Ulster flowed in from Toronto, Manitoba, Melbourne, Auckland and the Ulster diaspora around the world.

The Empire and its impact on Ulster Unionist thinking at the time of the Third Home Rule Crisis is a topic that requires and merits more research.

The Events of Ulster Day, 28 September 1912

Ulster was the only part of Ireland to experience the full vigour of the Industrial Revolution. Ulster-Scots energy and dynamism had made early twentieth-century Belfast one of the major industrial powerhouses of the world. Saturday was then a normal working day but on Saturday 28 September 1912 the industrial heart of the great city was still: the great shipyards were silent; the looms were idle in the linen mills; the rope works and the foundries were deserted.

At eleven o'clock in over one hundred well-attended church services across Belfast, congregations sang, as was appropriate in a time of national crisis, 'O God our help in ages past'. In the Ulster Hall, in the Assembly Hall, in the Grosvenor Hall, similar services were being held. Carson and the Unionist leadership stood together at the Ulster Hall and, before God



Ulster Day at Enniskillen

and the people, dedicated themselves for the coming struggle.

When at noon the religious services ended, Carson and the Unionist leaders, preceded by the Boyne Standard, an ancient-looking yellow silk banner carried by an Ensign Watson before William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne on 1 July 1690, and a smartly turned-out guard of men wearing bowler hats and carrying batons, walked along Bedford Street from the Ulster Hall to the City Hall. Major Frederick Crawford, who allegedly signed the Covenant in his own blood, commanded the guard. Crawford was a man of earnest intent: he meant business, as the Larne gunrunning was to demonstrate. There was no cheering; there was no frivolity. All was solemnity as Carson passed through the throng.

The Unionist leaders were welcomed by the Lord Mayor and the fifty-two Unionist members of the Corporation and were led across the great marble vestibule in the City Hall to a large round table appropriately draped with a Union Flag. The *Northern Whig* observed that 'gathered around the flag-draped drumhead' was 'a body of men who represented a very large part of the capital, the talent, the genius and the energy of the city of Belfast. If the Covenant was treason nearly all that makes for prosperity, enlightenment and progress in this city will have to be impeached'.

As photographic shutters snapped and cinematic handles turned, Carson stepped forward and solemnly signed the Covenant. He was followed by Lord Londonderry and then by representatives of the Protestant Churches,



Women signing the Declaration at Raphoe

the Belfast Unionist MPs, members of the local public bodies, and the officers of the Ulster Unionist Council and of the Grand Orange Lodge. At one o'clock the gates of the City Hall were thrown open and the large crowds which had assembled and filled Donegall Place and Donegall Square surged forward eager to append their signatures, to bind their fate to that of their fellow Ulstermen. Lines of desks stretching for a third of a mile along the corridors of the City Hall allowed 540 signatures to be taken simultaneously. The signing went on unceasingly until eleven o'clock that night.

However impressive the scenes at Belfast City Hall, they should never be allowed to obscure the fact that the Covenant was signed elsewhere: in other venues in Belfast; in the towns and villages of Ulster; from the shores of south Donegal to the Ards peninsula; from the drumlins of Co. Cavan to the rugged coast of north Antrim. Within Ulster the Covenant was signed at some five hundred centres. The people of rural Ulster were no less enthusiastic than their urban fellow citizens. In the unionist heartland the Covenant was signed almost to a man. Elsewhere the climate was less friendly: defying the threats of their nationalist neighbours, the unionists in Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal signed the Covenant. In its own way the signing of the Covenant in small rural communities was just as impressive as the scenes in Ulster's capital, a point made by the author Violet Martin writing in *The Spectator*. She had

observed the Covenant being signed in a village in south Londonderry and was greatly impressed by ‘the unadorned and individual action of those who had left their fields, and taken their lives and liberties in their hands laying them forth in the open sunshine as the measure of their resolve.’

Hugh Godley (the future 2nd Lord Kilbracken), whose family home was at Killegar, Co. Leitrim, provided further evidence of unionist earnestness in a letter to his friend Violet Asquith, the Prime Minister’s daughter:

All the people I have talked to of whatever station, from the Archbishop of Armagh to the boy who weeds the garden, are passionately anti-Home Rule. They really think that if it passes there will be a serious rising in Ulster ... It is very difficult till one gets among them to realize that all these deep feelings are not merely invented by politicians for party purposes.

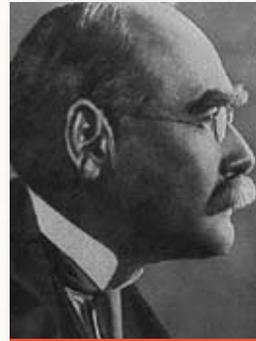
Understandably, the nationalist *Irish News* tried to dismiss Ulster Day as of little consequence, a ‘silly masquerade’. The paper asserted that most of the signatories had never bothered to read the document; even of those who had bothered, most would not have understood it. The few who had both read and understood the document had little intention of honouring their pledge. Events, however, were to prove the *Irish News* comprehensively wrong. Ordinary unionists clearly did value their ‘cherished position of equal citizenship within the United Kingdom’ and ‘civil and religious freedom’. When the Ulster Unionist Council established the Ulster Volunteer Force in January 1913, Ulster unionists honoured their pledge to ‘stand by one another’ by joining its ranks. The landing of thirty-five thousand rifles and three million rounds of ammunition at Larne, Bangor and Donaghadee helped to disabuse those who believed Ulstermen were bluffing when they bound themselves to ‘use all means which may be found necessary’ to defeat the Home Rule conspiracy. The formal establishment of the Provisional Government of Ulster, in July 1914, made it abundantly clear that unionists were standing by their pledge never ‘to recognise the authority’ of a Dublin parliament.

In 1916 seven men signed the Proclamation of the Republic in Dublin. The American Declaration of Independence of 1776 had fifty-six signatories. However, in 1912 virtually an entire community put their signatures to the Ulster Covenant. In Ulster, 218,206 men signed the Covenant and 228,991 women signed a parallel declaration associating themselves with the men ‘in their uncompromising opposition to the new Home Rule Bill now before parliament’. A further 19,162 men and 5,055 women of Ulster birth signed in Dublin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, York, Liverpool, London, Manchester and Bristol. On board the *SS Lake Champlain* twelve second-class passengers, four men and eight women, and thirty-four third-class passengers registered their opposition to Home Rule.

By the end of the historic Ulster Day, the Unionist population had demonstrated their resolve to the British parliament, to the rest of the British people and to the world. *The Times* opined that the events of Ulster Day brought to a close ‘a fortnight memorable in the history of Ulster’ and remarked that ‘the impression left on the mind of every competent observer is that of a community absolutely united in its resistance to the act of separation with which it is threatened’. It was an assessment not at variance with that of the *Northern Whig* which, comparing the day’s events with those of the Ulster Unionist Convention of 17 June 1892, asserted that Ulster had delivered an ultimatum to the British Government which was as ‘enthusiastic and unanimous a pronouncement as was ever made by a people placed on their defence against an assault upon their liberties.’

Poetry

Political crises usually stimulate interesting intellectual, cultural and literary endeavour, and this is true of the events of 1912. The introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill and the events of Ulster Day itself prompted the penning of two interesting poems: one by Rudyard Kipling, a Nobel laureate; the other by William Forbes Marshall, a young man about to embark on a life of very impressive achievement.



Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Rudyard Kipling was born in India and spent much of his working life there, a fact that is reflected in a great deal of his work. For a long time his work was regarded as unfashionable but in recent times it has been coming back into favour. He produced the two Jungle Books – the inspiration for the Disney film – and these have always enjoyed great popularity with children. According to the BBC, his poem, ‘If’, is the United Kingdom’s favourite poem. In 1907 Kipling received the Nobel Prize in Literature.

In politics Kipling was a firm Unionist and supporter of Ulster. Kipling was very keen on Portrush, observing that it had a ‘golf course second only to St Andrews’. As Kipling acknowledged in 1911, his instinctive sympathy for Ulster unionism was partially ancestral. James MacDonald, his maternal great-great grandfather was a Scot, allegedly a Jacobite, who had settled in Ulster and who had been converted to Methodism by John Wesley himself. He lies buried in, to employ Kipling’s own words, ‘a grim Methody churchyard’ in Ballinamallard, Co. Fermanagh. Kipling’s mother, Alice Macdonald, was one of four remarkable sisters. One sister, Louisa, was the mother of Stanley Baldwin, the future Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister. Baldwin once inquired of Cahir Healy, the Nationalist MP for Fermanagh and Tyrone, how things were in the staunchly unionist village

of Ballinamallard. The other two sisters, Georgiana and Agnes, married the highly successful nineteenth-century painters Sir Edward Burne-Jones and Sir Edward Poynter respectively. In Rottingdean, in Sussex, to which he had retired, Kipling was a neighbour of Sir Edward Carson. He was a signatory of the British Covenant (along with Sir Edward Elgar and two million other Britons). He contributed at least £30,000 to the Ulster cause and assisted in the bankrolling of the Larne gunrunning. ‘Ulster 1912’ appeared in the *Morning Post* (and elsewhere) on the eve of the introduction of Asquith’s Home Rule Bill. The poem prompted one Liberal MP in the House of Commons to ask the Attorney General if Kipling would be prosecuted for producing seditious verses. James Craig volunteered to read out the poem so that MPs would know what they were talking about but unfortunately the Attorney General deemed it unnecessary.

Ulster 1912

The dark eleventh hour
 Draws on and sees us sold
 To every evil power
 We fought against of old.
 Rebellion, rapine, hate,
 Oppression, wrong and greed
 Are loosed to rule our fate,
 By England’s act and deed.

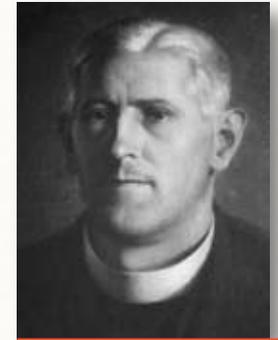
The faith in which we stand
 The laws we made and guard,
 Our honour, lives, and land
 Are given for reward
 To murder done by night,
 To treason taught by day,
 To folly, sloth, and spite,
 And we are thrust away.

The blood our fathers spilt
 Our love, our toils, our pains,
 Are counted us for guilt,
 And only bind our chains.
 Before an Empire's eyes,
 The traitor claims his price.
 What need of further lies?
 We are the sacrifice.

We know the war prepared
 On every peaceful home,
 We know the hells declared
 For such as serve not Rome —
 The terror, threats, and dread
 In market, hearth, and field —
 We know, when all is said,
 We perish if we yield.

Believe, we dare not boast,
 Believe, we do not fear —
 We stand to pay the cost
 In all that men hold dear.
 What answer from the North?
 One Law, one Land, one Throne
 If England drive us forth
 We shall not fall alone.

William Forbes Marshall (1888-1959)



William Forbes Marshall is best remembered as “The Bard of Tyrone” and the author of “Livin’ in Drumlister”, but to think of him only as “The Bard of Tyrone” is to miss out on much of this extraordinary man’s life, work and legacy.

Marshall was simultaneously a Presbyterian minister, a poet, a pioneer in the study of Ulster’s language and dialect, a playwright and novelist, the chronicler of Ulster’s links with America, and a convinced Unionist and an enthusiastic, if somewhat unorthodox, Orangeman.

Marshall was no ordinary man. Yet, he was ordinary in the sense that he was genuinely a man of the people who could relate to the experiences of his fellow men and women. What made Marshall truly extraordinary was the sheer range of his gifts and talents and the breadth of his interests.

In March 1992 Alex Blair told the Presbyterian Historical Society that Marshall ‘virtually single-handedly ... created a culture and heritage for the Ulsterman of which he could be proud. He gave him a distinctive consciousness which enabled him to have an identity of his own’.

As we have seen, the concept of a covenant was inspired by the various Covenants of sixteenth and seventeenth century Scotland. Marshall makes the connection explicit. This poem was published in the *Northern Whig*, Belfast’s Liberal Unionist morning newspaper, on 28 September 1912. It is not overly fanciful to imagine men and women reading the poem over the breakfast table before they went out to sign the Covenant and Declaration.

The Blue Banner

Firm-leagued we face the future, tho' the road be dark and steep,
The road that leads to honour is the lonely road we keep,
And, though all the world forsake us, this is the course we hold,
The course our fathers followed in the Cov'nant days of old.

We fain would look for comfort to the land from whence we came,
Where still abide our kith and kin and clansmen of our name,
Where lives were deemed of small account by valiant men and true,
For Christ, His Crown, His Cov'nant and the war-worn folds of blue.

Long years have been and faded since the old-time banner waved,
See! How it flashes once again ere dangers must be braved,
The Cov'nant oath we now will swear that Britain may be told,
We stand for faith and freedom and the memories of old.

For all they died for gladly in the homeland o'er the sea,
For blood-won rights that still are ours as Ulsterborn and free,
For the land we came to dwell in, and the martyr's faith we hold -
God grant we be as leal to these as were the men of old!



Did your ancestors sign the Ulster Covenant? The archive of the Ulster Unionist Council, held by the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), contains just under half a million original signatures and addresses of the men who signed the Ulster Covenant, and of the women who signed the parallel Declaration. Previously, the Covenant was both difficult and very time-consuming to access. PRONI has now improved access by digitising all the signatures. You can now find out whether your grandparents, great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents signed the Covenant or the Declaration by visiting

<http://www.proni.gov.uk/ulstercovenant/index.html>

It is well worth while consulting the search hints and tips provided on the site.

As we approach the centenary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912, the purpose of this publication is to examine this crucially important event in Ulster history. It does so by examining three aspects of the Covenant's history. Firstly, it explores the origins and background to the Ulster Covenant. Secondly, utilising the text of the Covenant, it explains why Ulster unionists opposed Home Rule in the years before the Great War. Finally, it briefly describes the events of Ulster Day, 28 September 1912.



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