

# The Island of Ireland

A hundred years ago last month, the House of Lords passed legislation to divide the island of Ireland into two parts. It was a move we continue to feel the effects of to this day. **Lord Lexden** tells the story

“**Y**ou have agreed to a revolution in Ireland.” So said Edward Carson, the famous leader of the Irish Unionists, as the legislation giving full internal self-government to 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland was passed by the House of Lords, of which he was then a Member, in December 1922.

Ten years earlier in 1912 Carson had begun raising a 100,000-strong paramilitary force in Ulster to resist any devolution of power from Westminster to Ireland. Now, to his disgust, a separate Irish state was brought into being. His campaign to try to stop it had, however, helped preserve six counties, known since 1920 as Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom.

Although Irish republicans would never agree — in 1922 or at any other time — nearly one million unionists in the nine counties of Ulster were so implacably opposed to a government in Dublin that an area had to be excluded from its control, where loyal subjects of the Crown could reside.

Britain had the thankless task of determining the excluded area. Six of the Ulster counties, rather than the full nine, were brought within the boundaries of the new Northern Ireland. This proved as controversial as partition itself. Though highly imperfect, such an arrangement allowed more republicans to be part of an independent state, but still left many trapped — as they saw it — in a foreign country. Their resentment would never fade.

The IRA attacked Northern Ireland ferociously in the first half of 1922, inevitably stoking sectarian strife between Protestants and Catholics, which tended to assist the IRA's cause by enabling them to masquerade as the Catholics' defenders.

In total 232 people, including two Unionist MPs, were killed, nearly 1,000 injured, and more than £3m-worth of property destroyed. Tough action by the authorities in Northern Ireland, including the

internment of many republicans, helped restore order by the summer of 1922. It came inevitably at a price: the alienation of the minority who supported or sympathised with republicanism. But peace would last until the late 1960s.

Few in Britain shared Carson's feelings of deep discontent over the independence of the rest of Ireland in December 1922. He exerted no influence on the new Conservative government of Andrew Bonar Law, which had won a large majority at a general election the previous month. Its platform had included the recognition of a self-governing state in Ireland. The Irish Free State Constitution Act went through both Houses quickly and without a division.

No other way existed of restoring stability and peace in the 26 counties of Ireland after a ruthless campaign by the IRA which the British authorities had failed to suppress, horrifying people everywhere with the brutal methods to which they had resorted. Three words — Black and Tans — became lodged in the collective memory as a perpetual reminder of British disgrace.

The scope of the new state had been agreed a year earlier when Bonar Law's predecessor, the great David Lloyd George, had signed a momentous Anglo-Irish Treaty in Downing Street with some of the Irish republican leaders, headed by Michael Collins.

They were denied the republic, to which many of them were passionately committed. Opinion in Britain in 1921 to 1922 could not possibly have been induced to accept complete separation (it came peacefully and with agreement 27 years later in 1949).

Instead, it was agreed that the new state would have all the powers of the existing British dominions, like Canada and Australia. They were formally conferred on elected Irish politicians in Dublin, who had been provisionally in charge since the start of the year, under the legislation passed a century ago this month. The Lord lieutenant, symbol of British authority, departed. A relatively powerless governor-general took his

place, the post going to a former Irish Nationalist MP.

Bonar Law said that not only the supporters of this huge constitutional change, "but those who have been bitterly opposed" would "rejoice as deeply and as wholeheartedly if it turns out the success that we all earnestly desire."

That cautious note was appropriate as Britain handed over full control to the Free State government a century ago. The new state had been engulfed since June 1922 in a civil war, a more terrible conflict than any that had occurred since the Irish rebellion of 1798. A minority of republicans could not accept the continuing weak connection with Britain which the 1922 constitution provided.

Two thousand – perhaps more – died; there is no agreed figure. Fewer had been killed during the preceding terrorist operations to drive the British out of Ireland.

In Britain, there was astonishment at the ruthlessness of the new Irish

government; 77 summary executions without trial took place. There was no sense of outrage among Irish opinion at large, as there would have been under British rule. The Free State government was supported, even at its most coercive, because it was Irish, a point made by speakers in the Lords in debates on Bonar Law's bill.

Strong measures, which failed before 1922, succeeded now. By May 1923 the new government was in full control of the country.

A century on, no one would question Bonar Law's decision to complete Lloyd George's work by giving the new Irish state its constitution, ending more than 850 years of British involvement in the territory for which it now assumed full responsibility.

What mattered above all to Bonar Law, a passionate but realistic unionist, was the pledge to keep Northern Ireland within the British state in conformity with the wishes of its majority. It is a commitment that all of us who are unionists insist must endure, despite all the difficulties involved in fulfilling it. 🇬🇧

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian



London 1921 (l-r) Arthur Griffith, EJ Duggan, Michael Collins, Robert Barton and Gavan Duffy sign the Irish Free State Treaty



Belfast 1914 Sir Edward Carson



1912 Andrew Bonar Law

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1920 Cartoon of David Lloyd George's plan for Government of Ireland Act