

# Reviews

## Friends in High Places: Ulster's Resistance to Home Rule, 1912-14

Alan F. Parkinson  
Ulster Historical Foundation,  
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## Ulster since 1600: Politics, Economy, and Society

Edited by Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw  
Oxford University Press, £35

A century ago Britain had a hung Parliament. It failed to produce a coalition government, though not for want of trying. In 1910 Liberals and Conservatives held long and intensive discussions to see if they could find a way of sharing power. Lloyd George and Churchill, then rising stars in the Liberal firmament, were particularly keen to lay aside party differences, exhibiting for the first time their enthusiasm for ministries of all the talents which would recur later in their careers. They looked forward to serving in a coalition that would “govern the country on middle lines which will be acceptable to both parties, providing measures of moderate social reform”.

But the finest political minds were unable to devise bipartisan solutions to the two most serious problems facing them: the future of the House of Lords and Home Rule for Ireland. The coalition talks

collapsed and the Liberals teamed up with the Irish Nationalist Party, provoking Tory fury. The amiable search for consensus was replaced by the constant exchange of insults.

Three years later, after a bitter constitutional conflict over the powers of the Lords, the Conservative Party's sole interest was to bring about the downfall of those with whom it had once discussed partnership. All restraint was cast aside in 1913 as Asquith's government moved towards the final stages of delivering a devolved parliament in Dublin to its Irish allies. The Tories caused widespread shock by uniting themselves unreservedly with Asquith's implacable Unionist opponents in Ulster who were equipping themselves for armed resistance.

1913 saw the formation of a paramilitary organisation, the Ulster Volunteer Force, which within a few months had some 100,000 Unionists in its ranks with training centres and arms depots throughout the Province. The Conservative leader, Andrew Bonar Law, had earlier declared that: “I can imagine no length of resistance to which Ulster can go in which I would not be prepared to support them”. An extreme right-wing Tory MP said that “any man would be justified in shooting Mr Asquith in the streets of London”. The prospect of open civil war in Ireland did not cause the Tories to draw back. It took the mobilisation of European armies in August 1914 to

preserve a tense and uneasy peace across the Irish Sea.

This extraordinary episode in Anglo-Irish history has been widely deplored. Dr Alan Parkinson, an academic expert on Ulster's history, proves a fine guide in explaining how it came about and in charting its dramatic course. He makes excellent use of contemporary newspaper reports and of unpublished documents in both Britain and Ireland. In February 1912 Churchill visited Belfast to deliver a passionate defence of the Liberals' Home Rule Bill. An eyewitness described how, as he and his wife emerged from their hotel to drive to his meeting, “the crowd surged forward with an angry growl. For a moment, it seemed the car would be thrown bodily over on top of the Liberal leader”. The police went into action. “They drove into



the mob with fists and sticks, holding them off long enough to give the driver sufficient time to start the engine”.

Then, as now, many Englishmen became completely alienated from Ulster as a result of such ugly incidents. But friends of the Unionists remained numerous – and not just in high places, as this full, balanced and evocative study shows. Alan Parkinson concludes that “the public was increasingly willing to empathise with Ulster Unionism”. At over 5,000 meetings organised by the Tories with speakers from Ulster during these years and in the dominant Tory press, the message was constantly reiterated: a loyal minority in Ireland was under dire threat from “a bellicose majority and bullying government with no electoral mandate”. This evoked “a patriotic response from the traditionally

fair-minded English public”. Reporting on a huge rally in Hyde Park in April 1914, *The Times* referred enthusiastically to the sea of Union Jacks hanging “from Piccadilly windows, omnibuses, cars, bicycles, barrows and even the dustcart of

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a road sweeper as Grosvenor Street rubbed shoulders with Whitechapel and peers struggled for places near the platforms with dockers from the East End”.

Following the partition of Ireland after the First World War, the public mood in England changed abruptly. Popular Tory

enthusiasm for the Ulster Unionist cause vanished almost without trace, never to return. Parkinson’s book does an immense service in reminding us of the intense patriotic support it once enjoyed among all social classes in Tory England.

Violence and bigotry have now come to define the English image of Ulster. That simple view is challenged in the collection of wide-ranging essays that appear in Ulster since 1600. In the forty years before 1969 violent crime was so rare that every murder created a sensation. Two centuries earlier Ulster was chiefly preoccupied by its growing prosperity based on the linen industry. Women, we are told, increasingly rebelled against “the gender inequalities of their time”. Large-scale modern industrialisation came late to the Province: in 1881 under a quarter of the people lived in places with a population of over 2000. Curiously, cricket was for a long time much less popular in Ulster than in other parts of Ireland.

The diverse and varied strands of social and economic life in Ulster are virtually unknown. The 23 contributors to Ulster since 1600 enrich understanding. But through all their work runs the fundamental cause of the Province’s woes which spring directly from the seventeenth century Plantation. “It was clear by the 1630s that the distinction between natives and colonists, between Protestants and Catholics, had assumed an enduring quality”. It is tragic that after 1918 England lost patience with this deeply divided society and its intransigent politicians. Can constructive English interest ever be reawakened? 🇬🇧

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Members of the Ulster Volunteer Force prepare for action in Larne, County Antrim, in August 1913